



Social Mobility
Commission

Changing gears

Understanding downward social mobility

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Research report
November 2020

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Foreword



Metaphors powerfully shape the way we form judgements about the world in which we live and how it should be navigated. Social mobility is commonly depicted using vertical imagery such as ladders and staircases.

At the bottom are less important jobs, deserving less respect and, as a result, less reward. At the top are the important jobs, that we should 'look up to', that generate respect and therefore excellent remuneration. Social mobility discussions are therefore disproportionately about movement in only one direction – up the ladder.

Children often aspire to earn more than their parents and move into higher-paid, status-enhancing, professional jobs, such as lawyers, doctors and bankers. This has become a more realistic ambition for a much larger section of the population in the last two decades as the number of graduates has risen exponentially.



In contrast, downward mobility is usually defined as someone slipping down the occupational ladder into a job which is paid less and is less prestigious than those of their parents. Yet why should this be so? Why is a lawyer or doctor valued more highly than a carer or a shopkeeper?

Should we be discussing instead what is necessary to enable the UK to have more downward mobility by choice – moving to a job you would really love to do, even if it pays less? Doing a job that gives you a greater sense of pride and worth, or better work/life balance, rather than the one your father and grandfather did?

The current pandemic has already shifted the public conversation about occupational value and shown that today's heroes are nurses, cleaners, supermarket workers and carers – and should be paid more. Even pre-pandemic, many young people were no longer pursuing a career for life, trying instead to pick jobs they felt more passionate about.

But life is not that simple. Most people who move down the career ladder today do not choose to do so. They are forced into lower living standards because they don't have the right qualifications, they lose their jobs in an economic crisis, they take on a less ambitious role after bringing up children or because their circumstances change significantly. They can quickly move into a vicious circle of low pay and low self-esteem.

Our report – 'Changing gears' – looks at who experiences downward mobility, why, and how they feel about it. It analyses gender, ethnic diversity and educational achievement in one of the most comprehensive pieces of research to date on this issue. It finds that downward mobility can be much more unfair on some than others and can be hard to escape from.

Roughly one in five men and one in four women aged 30–59 experienced downward mobility in the UK between 2014 and 2018. Individuals from black and ethnic minority (BAME) groups born outside the UK were significantly more likely to drop down a career rung than those from White

British backgrounds. Women with children were also more likely to experience this, particularly those with large families – a parent penalty that did not stretch to men.

Education can also be a game-changer. Men and women with degrees are 40–50 percentage points less likely to be downwardly mobile compared with those with qualifications below GCSE level. Graduate-led professions have also had a significant impact on mobility. Downward mobility is highest for the children whose parents were in occupations that have since become graduate-led, such as nursing, policing and the military. Often, children are unable to follow their parents into these professions because they are not able to get the relevant degree.

Our report shows that the statistics hide the complex personal stories behind gear shifts in careers. Interviews with individuals from a range of backgrounds who have experienced downward mobility exposed very different experiences as they moved to different jobs. Many criticised the traditional definition of success, which is often linked to status and a ‘final destination’. Many did not feel they had moved downwards and stressed that they had a much broader personal definition of success – linked to wellbeing, or life balance.

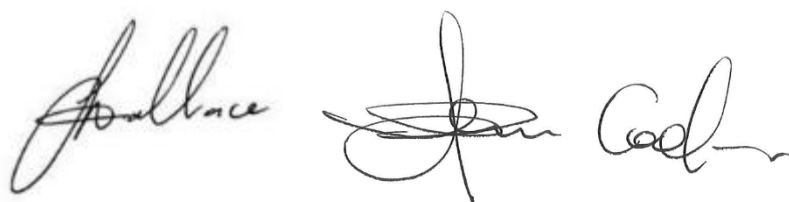
However, for others the experience was deeply negative, particularly those forced to move jobs or unable to get the job they wanted. Many felt they were trapped in low-paid work and could not afford a good standard of living. Others felt undervalued and had lost their sense of purpose at work. For them, downward mobility was an acute struggle.

It has never been a more important time to recognise that struggle. We are in the midst of an economic crisis and many are losing their jobs and having to take on temporary or lower-paid work. Others, working at home, are re-evaluating their lives and considering a role change to spend more time with their families.

We should seize this opportunity to accelerate a shift in our perception of social mobility. We should look at occupations on a more horizontal spectrum where everyone can make a contribution to the effective running of our society and therefore deserves a more even share of reward.

The pandemic has highlighted the essential role played by nurses, porters, refuse collectors, supermarket workers, carers and nursery staff. These groups of workers have always been underpaid and are often undervalued. Together, we need to start recognising and rewarding them more fairly.

We should examine the relationship between reward, living standards and how we value different occupations. What would the UK look like if people had a good standard of living and a high sense of self-worth irrespective of their occupation? It should no longer be about up and down. It is time to replace those rickety ladders with a network of level paths.



Sandra Wallace and Steven Cooper,

Interim Co-Chairs, Social Mobility Commission

Executive summary

There is great policy interest in understanding and improving social mobility in the UK. We know that a certain level of downward social mobility is necessary to allow individuals to experience upward mobility. But there is little evidence which helps us to understand the extent of downward mobility and what drives it.

So far policy-makers have focused on helping people to experience upward mobility, ignoring the fact that others have to move down. This was not such an issue while professional and managerial jobs were still expanding, as there was more room at the top. But this is no longer the case. Given the many challenges we face due to the coronavirus pandemic, it is vital to understand why and how individuals experience downward mobility, and what, if any, barriers they face.

Building on the Social Mobility Commission's first exploration of downward mobility in 2015,¹ this report calculates for the first time the extent of downward mobility in the UK and explores the dynamics of how people experience that journey through in-depth interviews. The report begins to differentiate between typologies of downward mobility, in particular the distinction between involuntary downward mobility where people slip down the ladder and voluntary downward mobility where people are able to change gears safely.

This new report shows who is more likely to be downwardly mobile, and gives us access to the lived experiences of people who have experienced downward mobility, in their own words.

Defining downward social mobility

Downward mobility takes two main forms: voluntary and involuntary. Some people voluntarily choose to take a 'lower' occupation. For some, however, this shift is involuntary and individuals face structural barriers preventing them from moving up.

Downward mobility can also be measured in different ways – by occupation, income or wealth. In this report we look at occupational mobility only. For the purpose of this research, a person is described as downwardly mobile if they move down at least one broad occupational group compared with their parents.

The Social Mobility Commission (SMC) commissioned Ipsos MORI, in collaboration with Professor Lindsey Macmillan and Luke Sibieta, to undertake a systematic study of the nature and

¹ The Commission's 2015 report found that children from professional backgrounds experienced a 'glass floor' where they were less likely to be downwardly mobile. McKnight, A. (2015), Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the 'glass floor', available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/downward-mobility-and-opportunity-hoarding.

consequences of downward social mobility. This included the societal expectation that everyone should aim to improve upon their parent's outcomes.

The study is not intended to look at policy implications. Instead it aims to fill the gap in understanding the prevalence, nature and consequences of downward mobility. We conducted an in-depth study of existing quantitative data (Labour Force Survey, National Child Development Study, British Cohort Study and Understanding Society survey) as well as primary qualitative research with individuals experiencing downward mobility in the UK.

In this report, we investigate the phenomenon of downward mobility in greater depth, before exploring the potential drivers and consequences. It should be read alongside the technical report setting out the quantitative methods and findings in detail.

Key findings

What is the level of downward mobility in this country?

Between 2014 and 2018, 21% of men and 24% of women aged 30–59 experienced downward mobility in the UK. This puts the UK close to the international average, 28%, although there is no evidence or consensus on what the 'right' level of downward mobility is. It is also a persistent state. Of those experiencing downward mobility in a given year, about 80% remain downwardly mobile (in an occupational class lower than their parents) five years later.

Who is most likely to be downwardly mobile?

Downward mobility is highest among women with several children, ethnic minority groups from outside the UK and individuals with lower educational qualifications.

- Women and those with caring responsibilities:** Nearly a third (32%) of women with four or more children experienced downward mobility, compared with 23% of those with no children. The chances increased with each extra child from one to four. General lack of flexibility in working patterns required by employers, or the stress of combining working and child caring responsibilities, frequently led participants, particularly women, to sacrifice higher-status jobs to take up lesser roles. Having more children increases the chances of experiencing downward mobility for women but has only a small effect for men.
- Ethnic minorities:** Some BAME groups, especially those born outside the UK, are much more likely to experience downward mobility, even after accounting for their educational qualifications and other individual characteristics. Ethnic minorities born outside the UK, particularly those from Bangladeshi, Black African and Other Asian backgrounds, and men from Pakistani, Mixed and Other backgrounds were about 10–20 percentage points more likely to experience downward mobility than White British workers. Their qualifications were often not recognised in the UK, or they experienced discrimination and unfair treatment at the workplace preventing them from progressing further. For example, for individuals from Black African backgrounds 38% of men and 40% of women born outside the UK were downwardly mobile, compared with less than 25% of individuals from White British backgrounds.
- Those with lower educational qualifications:** Men and women with degrees are 50–60% less likely to be downwardly mobile, regardless of their skills in early life. This shows that talented people from less privileged backgrounds who do not or cannot access higher

education are more likely to experience downward mobility than people from privileged backgrounds, who perhaps demonstrate less skill in earlier life, but can access the higher education opportunities that matter when accessing the job market.

- **Those with parents whose profession has transitioned to be graduate-led:** Downward mobility is highest for children of those working in occupations that have tended to become more graduate-led over time (such as nursing, policing, fire or the military). This means that their children may not have been able to access similar occupations to their parents, without going into higher education. People experiencing downward mobility were also more likely to end up in certain sectors – including the police and military – which suggests that there are knock-on consequences across generations.

It is known that those who move up professional groupings usually suffer a class pay gap. This means they earn significantly less than people who were born into those professional groupings. Individuals who moved up to the professional classes earn about 5–10% less than those whose parents worked in professional occupations. In contrast, the downwardly mobile who move down from the professional groupings do not benefit from any persistent financial advantage compared with their peers born into the intermediate and routine or manual occupations.

Qualitative assessment: what individuals experience

Over the course of their lives, research participants had re-evaluated their own notions of what success meant to them. In many cases, this meant rejecting their own and what they saw as society's previously held definitions of success, in the form of wealth and professional status, in favour of a less rigid, more individualised definition.

While some made a proactive choice and felt that a lower-status job could provide greater life satisfaction and more opportunities, for others, downward mobility was far from comfortable.

It is not possible to quantify the proportion of individuals who experience voluntary or involuntary downward mobility. What we do know, however, is that the factors associated with 'unfair' involuntary downward mobility, such as access to educational opportunities, opportunity hoarding, racial discrimination, caring responsibilities or poverty, are consistent with those limiting upward social mobility.

A vicious cycle of low wages, long hours, caring for children and low prospects of career advancement made life difficult and draining. In addition, the effects of lowered status in the eyes of society could cause emotional distress, affecting people's mental health and wellbeing. Understanding involuntary downward mobility is therefore crucial to identifying the structural barriers faced by certain groups of downwardly mobile individuals.

The structure of this report

The rest of this report provides a brief overview of the methodology and sets out key findings as follows:

- **Chapter 1: Understanding downward mobility.** This chapter draws from both UK and international literature on social mobility, as well as our own context-setting qualitative research. It explores the nature of downward mobility in the UK, and research participants' perceptions that narratives around status are changing, towards a less rigid definition of what it means to be successful in our society.

- **Chapter 2: Changing gears.** This chapter is split into three sections: what downward mobility looks like across society as a whole; the subjective nature of downward mobility; and a final section drawing on case studies to illustrate how downward mobility is experienced differently in practice. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that downward mobility is complex and takes many forms, and that the negativity implied by the term 'downward' is misleading in some cases.
- **Chapter 3: A slippery slope?** This chapter draws from the qualitative and quantitative analysis, highlighting issues of inequality in downward mobility as it is experienced by different groups in society, and across people's lifetimes. It examines the role of factors such as economic disadvantage, access to educational opportunities, ethnicity, disabilities and health conditions, gender, caring responsibilities, parental aspiration, and access to support.
- **Conclusions: Level path.** The concluding chapter summarises key findings and discusses potential further implications of the research, as well as the importance of discussions about downward mobility in the current climate.

Overview of methodology

Ipsos MORI, in collaboration with Professor Lindsey Macmillan and Luke Sibieta, designed a mixed-method approach using existing quantitative datasets and primary qualitative research. The findings in this report are based on a synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative analysis as outlined below.

Quantitative analysis

We used data from a range of sources to document the nature, causes and consequences of downward mobility, using each for its strengths:

- the Labour Force Survey (LFS), a representative survey of the UK population, including detailed data on individual occupations/earnings, educational qualifications and subject of study at higher education (if attended)
- the National Child Development Study (NCDS), a cohort of all people born in one week in March 1958, and the British Cohort Study (BCS), a cohort of all people born in one week in April 1970
- Understanding Society, a household panel survey that followed 40,000 households from 2010 onwards

Full details of the sources and quantitative analysis are available in the technical report.

Qualitative analysis

The qualitative research consisted of context-setting focus groups with the general public and a main stage of qualitative research with those who have experienced intergenerational downward mobility.

We held two face-to-face focus groups in London and Leeds in August 2019 to explore how people perceived success and failure, and society's 'fear of falling'. Each group included 12 participants aged 35–55, a mix of gender and other demographic characteristics (including ethnicity and household composition), and there was a skew towards lower socio-economic grades (SEGs)¹ in Leeds and to higher SEGs in London. Separate subgroup tasks and discussions were held among men and women.

¹ 'Socio-economic grade' refers to demographic classifications of a given individual according to a set of occupational gradings.

Participants for the main stage of the research were selected based on profiles or ‘personas’ reflecting subgroups of the downwardly mobile. The personas were developed after the first stage of quantitative analysis and based on key features of the downwardly mobile population as highlighted in the data. The personas were refined during a workshop session attended by all members of the research team as well as stakeholders from SMC.

In total, 42 three-stage interviews were completed between October 2019 and January 2020. All participants were aged 30–50 and had experienced downward mobility. Interviews took place face to face where possible and were divided into three phases:



1: Introductory interview

Initial conversation to establish participants' details and build rapport (1.5hrs)



2: Artefact collection

Participants asked to reflect on key turning points in their life and upload a picture reminding them of each moment to an online app



3: In-depth discussion

To understand the drivers behind their decision-making, and the nature and consequences of their downward mobility (2-3hrs)

Interpreting qualitative data

Qualitative approaches are used to explore the nuances and diversity of views, the factors which shape or underlie them, and the situations in which views can change. The results are intended to be illustrative of the range of views, not statistically representative.

Verbatim comments have been included in this report to illustrate and highlight key points and common themes. Where verbatim quotes are used, they have been anonymised. For those in a lower occupational group than their parents, the quotes also include the occupation of their highest-earning parent. For those who *used* to work in a higher occupational role but at the time of the research were in a lower occupational group, we have instead included their previous role, as this change in occupation formed the basis of their inclusion in the research.

Each verbatim comment sets out the individual view of the participant who made it. The comments do not reflect the views of Ipsos MORI or SMC.

1. Understanding downward mobility

Key findings

- In a modern society based on meritocracy, people should have equal chances to move purposively between different occupational groupings. Where the distribution of jobs in the labour market remains constant (i.e. where we do not see expansion of professional occupations), for some to move upwards and have higher occupational status, some need to move downwards. Some individuals move by choice while others are forced to move involuntarily.
- Between 2014 and 2018, 21% of men and 24% of women aged 30–59 experienced downward mobility in the UK. This puts the UK close to the international average (28%), according to research by the OECD and others. However, we do not know what a ‘good’ level of downward mobility looks like in comparison.
- Downward mobility is a largely persistent state – of those experiencing downward mobility in a given year, about 80% remain downwardly mobile (in an occupation lower than their parent’s) five years later. Again, there is not enough evidence to suggest what the ideal target should be.
- For the purpose of this research, we define downward social mobility as moving to an occupational group lower than the occupational group of your parents. There are other important factors at play, such as income and personal and family wealth. While we do not analyse personal income shifts, evidence shows that people who move up to the professional classes usually suffer a ‘class pay gap’. This means that they earn significantly less than people who were born into the professional classes. In contrast, the downwardly mobile who move away from the professional classes do not benefit from any persistent financial advantage compared with their peers born into the intermediate and working classes. In other words, a professional background does not seem to offer a protective effect in income terms when people move to a lower occupational group.²
- When asked about the ways that society defines success, research participants felt that society’s traditional narratives equated success with wealth and occupational status. However, some participants (both those who were and those who were not downwardly mobile) felt that these definitions were outdated and instead subscribed to a more individual and nuanced definition of success on their own terms, often based on overcoming adversity, family status or wellbeing.

² While there does not seem to be a protective effect when it comes to income, individuals might have other sources of wealth, such as housing, inheritance or family wealth.

Introduction

Social mobility encompasses shifts according to a number of different measures, including occupation, income, wealth and wellbeing. In the UK, the level of social mobility has remained fairly constant in terms of movement between different occupational groups over the past 60 years.³ However, this hides a pattern of declining upward mobility and increasing downward mobility in recent generations.⁴ At the same time, intergenerational income mobility has declined.⁵ Blanden et al. show that absolute earnings mobility has also declined for those born since the 1970s.⁶ While 56% of sons born by 1975 achieved higher earnings than their fathers, only 33% of sons born in 1985 were earning as much as, or more, than their fathers: the majority of sons in most recent cohorts experienced downward mobility, earning less than the previous generation. This means that individuals' incomes are now more closely related to the incomes of their parents than was the case for previous generations.

What does this all mean? It means that people nowadays are just as likely to move between different occupational groups as they were 60 years ago, but they are more likely to be moving *upwards* than previous generations were. They are also more likely to earn a similar amount to their parents whereas, in previous generations, people had a better chance of moving into a different income group to their parents.

Why has this been happening? There is evidence that points to increasing income inequalities within occupational groups. In some professional occupational groups, people who have moved up from lower occupational groups are paid less than those from families from professional groups.⁷ The research found a range of explanations for these inequalities, including the 'Bank of Mum and Dad' affecting the opportunities that people can access, and sponsorship from higher-level colleagues. In addition, previous research has shown how those from higher social classes use multiple resources to ensure their children maintain their social standing – this is known as 'opportunity hoarding'.⁸

³ Goldthorpe, J. H. and M. Jackson (2007) 'Intergenerational Class Mobility in Contemporary Britain: Political Concerns and Empirical Findings' *British Journal of Sociology*, 58, pp. 525-546; Goldthorpe, J. H. and Mills, C. (2008), 'Trends in intergenerational class mobility in modern Britain: evidence from national surveys, 1972–2005', *National Institute Economic Review*, Vol. 205, pp. 83–100; Goldthorpe, J. H. (2013) *Understanding – and Misunderstanding – Social Mobility in Britain: The Entry of Economists, the Confusion of Politicians and the Limits of Educational Policy*. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42 (3), 431-450; Bukodi, E., Goldthorpe, J. H., Waller, L. and Kuha, J. (2015) 'The mobility problem in Britain: new findings from the analysis of birth cohort data' *The British Journal of Sociology* Vol 66(1), pp.93-116; Bukodi, E., and Goldthorpe, J. H. (2019) *Social Mobility and Education in Britain: Research, Politics and Policy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Bukodi et al., 'The mobility problem in Britain: new findings from the analysis of birth cohort data.'

⁵ Blanden, J. Goodman, A. Gregg, P. and Machin, S. (2004) 'Changes in intergenerational mobility in Britain', in (M. Corak, ed.), *Generational Income Mobility in North America and Europe*, 122–46, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Blanden, J., Gregg, P. and Macmillan, L. (2007) "Accounting for intergenerational Income Persistence: Non-cognitive Skills, Ability and Education" *The Economic Journal* Vol. 117 (519) pp. C43-C60; Gregg, P., Macmillan, L. and Vittori, C. (2017) "Moving Towards Estimating Lifetime Intergenerational Economic Mobility" *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 79 (1), pp. 79-100, DOI: 10.1111/obes.12146.

⁶ Blanden, J., Machin, S and Rahman, S. (2019), *Falling absolute mobility*, available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2019/05/08/millennials-are-some-of-the-worst-hit-by-social-mobility-decline-in-the-uk/>

⁷ Friedman, S., and Laurison, D. (2019) *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged* Bristol: Policy Press.

⁸ Goldthorpe, J. H. (2013) *Understanding – and Misunderstanding – Social Mobility in Britain: The Entry of Economists, the Confusion of Politicians and the Limits of Educational Policy*; McKnight, A. (2015), *Downward*

Individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds also earn more regardless of overall education levels, which may be linked to opportunity hoarding through greater access to prestigious education opportunities, accumulation of soft skills and other forms of advantage.

In addition, definitions of occupational groupings have changed over the years. Occupations considered to be intermediate decades ago might have a different definition or entry criteria now. Individuals might also be categorised within the same occupational group but earn widely varying incomes. The current definitions are also likely to further change in the future as the hierarchical concept of work continues to evolve. The intersectional relationships between different types of downward mobility are yet to be explored. While this research focuses on occupational mobility only, it is important to note the different forms of social mobility and the wider context.

This chapter seeks to define downward mobility, the extent to which it is present in the UK, and how this compares with other nations. We also show how research participants felt that society tended to equate success and failure with wealth (or lack thereof) and the status traditionally attached to particular occupational groupings. Participants felt these notions were outdated and believed instead that success was a more nuanced and subjective concept.

Exploring downward mobility

What is the extent of occupational downward mobility in the UK?

For the purpose of this research, a person is described as downwardly mobile if they move down at least one broad occupational group compared with their parents (from professional to intermediate, from intermediate to working, or from professional to working occupations).

“Social mobility is the link between a person’s occupation or income and the occupation or income of their parents.” Social Mobility Commission⁹

Put simply, social mobility is about ensuring your background does not determine your future.

Between 2014 and 2018, 21% of men and 24% of women aged 30–59 experienced downward mobility, and this was a permanent status for the majority (80% of those who were in a lower occupational group than their parents remained in a lower occupational group).

Relative social mobility is an important and necessary feature of society – for some people to move upwards, others have to move downwards. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 map the moves between the different occupational groupings, for men and women, and also show what proportion of people remained in the same occupational group as their parents.

Looking at Table 1.1, this means that 25% of working-age men had a parent in the professional grouping and are themselves in the professional grouping. Meanwhile, 10% of working-age men had a parent in the professional grouping but are themselves in the intermediate grouping, and 4% of working-age men had a parent in the professional grouping but are themselves in the

mobility, opportunity hoarding and the ‘glass floor’, available at:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/downward-mobility-and-opportunity-hoarding.

⁹ www.gov.uk/government/organisations/social-mobility-commission/about

working or more manual occupations. The majority of downward mobility is made up of shifts from professional to intermediate occupations for both men (10%) and women (11%).¹⁰

Table 1.1: Intergenerational movement between occupations (men)

		Own occupation			
		Professional	Intermediate	Working	ALL
Parental occupation	Professional	25%	10%	4%	38%
	Intermediate	16%	12%	7%	36%
	Working	9%	9%	8%	26%
	ALL	50%	31%	19%	100%

Source: Authors' calculations using the Labour Force Survey July to September 2014–2018. All men aged 30–59 in the workforce (excludes those not working or for whom occupational data is missing).

Table 1.2: Intergenerational movement between occupations (women)

		Own occupation			
		Professional	Intermediate	Working	ALL
Parental occupation	Professional	23%	11%	5%	39%
	Intermediate	15%	12%	8%	35%
	Working	9%	9%	8%	26%
	ALL	47%	31%	21%	100%

Source: Authors' calculations using the Labour Force Survey July to September 2014–2018. All women aged 30–59 in the workforce (excludes those not working or for whom occupational data is missing).

It is also important to note that downward mobility takes many forms. As further discussed in Chapter 2, some individuals experience 'comfortable' voluntary downward mobility and choose to shift to a lower occupational grouping. Others are forced to move as a result of structural and systematic barriers put upon them. This type of involuntary downward mobility is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

How much downward mobility should we have?

To date, there has been no discussion on what constitutes an ideal level of social mobility in society, but analyses by Bukodi and others¹¹ and the OECD¹² have shown the UK to have a balanced level of social mobility, with similar levels of upward and downward movement.

¹⁰ Source: authors' calculations using the Labour Force Survey July to September 2014–2018. Please refer to the technical report for a full explanation of how occupational classes are defined. Examples of these classes include:

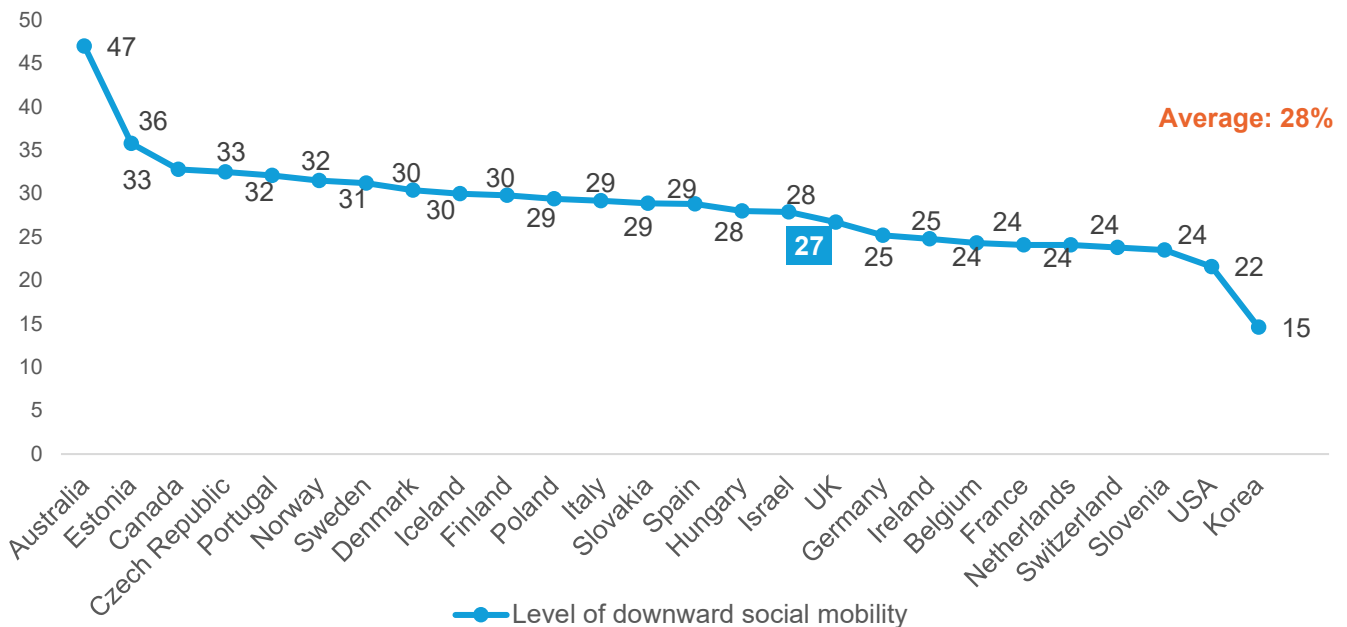
- professional occupations: director, doctor, lawyer, teacher, nurse, journalist
- intermediate occupations: police officer, secretary, shopkeeper, garage proprietor, electrician, chef
- working occupations: dental nurse, fitness instructor, bus driver, hairdresser, cleaner

¹¹ Bukodi, E., Paskov, M., and Nolan, B. (2017) 'Intergenerational Class Mobility in Europe: A New Account and an Old Story' INET Oxford Working Paper no. 2017-03.

¹² OECD (2018), A broken social elevator? How to promote social mobility, Paris: OECD.

Looking specifically at levels of downward mobility, the UK level is around the average (at 26.7%) according to the OECD,¹³ which measured this across 26 nations. Figure 1.3 summarises the findings and shows the UK sitting alongside other similar economies such as Germany, Ireland, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Figure 1.3: Level of downward mobility across 26 nations



Source: OECD, A broken social elevator?

As described in the technical report, levels of upward and downward mobility are strongly linked to the changing occupational structure across generations. Countries experiencing large expansions of the professional groupings are more likely to experience high levels of upward mobility, whilst those experiencing smaller expansions in professional groupings are likely to experience lower level of upwards mobility. The UK previously experienced a large increase in the size of the professional occupations in the 1950s and 1960s, which led to high chances of upward mobility. The size of the professional grouping in the UK is now more stable and the UK sees similar levels of upward and downward mobility.

While this evidence may suggest that the UK's situation is close to the average, it is important to consider whether upward and downward mobility occur equally among all groups, or whether some people in the UK experience limitations in their ability to move up, down or sideways. Further exploration and discussion are needed to move the debate forward and establish what a healthy level of downward mobility might be.

Downward mobility and inequality

Downward mobility is inextricably linked with inequality of opportunity. While there are many factors at play, numerous published studies¹⁴ as well as our own analysis provide evidence that

¹³ OECD, A broken social elevator?

¹⁴ Goldthorpe, J. H. (2013) Understanding – and Misunderstanding – Social Mobility in Britain: The Entry of Economists, the Confusion of Politicians and the Limits of Educational Policy; Gregg, P., Macmillan, L. and Vittori, C. (2018) "Intergenerational income mobility: Access to top jobs, the low-pay no-pay cycle, and the role

people's class background and educational opportunities impact on their likelihood of experiencing social mobility.

“Social mobility is about ensuring that a person's occupation and income are not tied to where they started in life.” Social Mobility Commission¹⁵

The World Economic Forum (WEF) also highlights the link between inequality and social mobility and demonstrates a linear relationship between a country's income inequality and its score for social mobility.¹⁶ The report finds that “low social mobility entrenches historical inequalities and higher income inequalities fuel lower social mobility”. Out of 82 global economies, their analysis ranks the UK 21st (with a social mobility index score of 74.4 out of 100). While this places the UK among the top-ranking countries on a global scale, it sits below the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, France, Canada, Australia and Japan.

The UK's lower ranking is driven by relatively lower scores for fair wages and working conditions, and for the quality and equity of education and lifelong learning. This shift towards wanting to include the wider mix of factors which contribute to social mobility is a feature of the WEF's Global Social Mobility Index.¹⁷ The index draws on five broad measures to provide an overall score for social mobility across 82 nations. WEF's 2020 report calls for a new social mobility agenda to level the playing field for all groups in society, and recommends that policy development focuses on improving health outcomes; improving education access and quality; embracing lifelong learning; enhancing social protection; and reforming taxation and the mix of public spending. It also highlights the role of employers in promoting social mobility via inclusive policies relating to employees, workers in the supply chain and the wider community.

We return to the subject of inequality in Chapter 3.

Evolving narratives of downward mobility

Many studies show that inequality exists in terms of who is more likely to experience downward mobility and that there are protective factors which shield people from this trajectory. For example, Goldthorpe shows that people from higher social groups make use of multiple resources to make sure their children maintain a certain social position – a phenomenon known

of education in a common framework” *Journal of Population Economics*, 32, pp. 501-528; Crawford, C., Gregg, P., Macmillan, L., Vignoles, A., and Wyness, G. (2016) “Higher Education, Career Opportunities and Intergenerational Inequality” *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* Vol. 32 (4), pp. 553-575 doi: 10.1093/oxrep/grw030; Macmillan, L., Tyler, C. and Vignoles, A. (2015) “Who gets the top jobs? The role of family background and networks in recent graduates' access to high status professions” *Journal of Social Policy* Vol. 44(3) pp.487-515.

¹⁵ SMC, *State of the Nation 2018–19: Social mobility in Great Britain*, London, SMC, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/798404/SMC_State_of_the_Nation_Report_2018-19.pdf

¹⁶ WEF (2020), *The global social mobility report 2020: Equality, opportunity and a new economic imperative*, Geneva: World Economic Forum, available at: www3.weforum.org/docs/Global_Social_Mobility_Report.pdf. The WEF's Social Mobility Index uses a broader measure encompassing five dimensions: health; education (access, quality/equity, lifelong learning); technology; work (opportunities, wages and conditions); and protection and institutions (social protection and inclusive institutions).

¹⁷ WEF, *The global social mobility report 2020*.

as ‘opportunity hoarding’.¹⁸ Recent research shows how parents from wealthier backgrounds have been able to buy houses in more affluent areas, in order that their children fall into catchment areas for better schools.¹⁹

There is no wage advantage for those who move away from the top

The research sought to explore the impact of downward mobility on earnings. The data shows that while there is a ‘class pay gap’ for those who are upwardly mobile, there is *not* a ‘wage advantage’ for those who are downwardly mobile.

People who move from a lower occupational group into the professional groupings suffer a ‘class pay gap’. This means that they earn less than peers in the same occupation who were born into the professional groupings. Individuals who moved up to the professional groupings earn about 5–10% less than those whose parents worked in professional occupations.²⁰

However, the reverse is not true: downwardly mobile individuals who move from the professional groupings do not retain a ‘wage advantage’ when they move to a lower occupational grouping. On average, individuals in routine or manual occupations consistently earn about 40–45% less than those who stay in the professional occupations – *irrespective* of whether they moved down or not, or which occupational grouping they moved down from.

Defining success and failure

As part of the context-setting to our study, we talked to a range of individuals from different backgrounds to understand their perspectives on their life situations and those of their peers. Specifically, we wanted to explore their perceptions of society’s definitions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ and to what extent they felt society had a ‘fear of failure’.

Participants felt that society traditionally viewed success as linked to wealth, status historically ascribed to particular professions and ‘conspicuous consumption’. Failure, in these terms, would translate to a low-status job, a lack of wealth and a reduced ability to consume ‘status’ items. This narrative cast the path to success or failure as linear, with the achievement of either being seen as a final destination. Some spoke evocatively about the fear attached to failure, referring to feelings of shame and embarrassment that could be associated with a lower status.

“My friend couldn’t get any job and ended up stacking shelves in a shop – he was ashamed because he couldn’t get another job. He felt people would look down on him.”

Focus group participant

An evolving narrative

Participants tended to distance themselves from what they saw as traditional conceptions of success and failure. People referenced friends or relatives who had attained traditional goals

¹⁸ Goldthorpe, J. H. (2013) Understanding – and Misunderstanding – Social Mobility in Britain: The Entry of Economists, the Confusion of Politicians and the Limits of Educational Policy. See also McKnight, Downward mobility.

¹⁹ Burgess, Greaves & Vignoles (2019) – School choice in England: evidence from national administrative data available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03054985.2019.1604332?journalCode=core20>

²⁰ Though there are differences depending on which wave of data is used – see Tables 5.2 to 5.5 and the accompanying commentary in the technical report for further detail.

linked to success, such as professional status, wealth and conspicuous consumption, but who lacked time with their families and faced multiple stresses linked with carrying more responsibility. Participants used these examples as evidence for rejecting these markers of success.

Instead, people subscribed to a more individualised, personal definition of success on their own terms. Personal definitions could change and evolve according to a person's life stage or circumstances. For example, becoming a parent, working in a more flexible way, following a vocation, or seeking personal or creative fulfilment. Linked to this, they rejected the notion of success and failure as final destinations, and people instead argued for a more fluid definition, evolving along with someone's changing life stage and associated priorities.

"People are understanding that happiness comes before status."

Focus group participant

"Success changes all the time. If you're a partner in a law firm, then maybe you can't have a family because it's too late."

Focus group participant

"If you follow your parents it could destroy you, my dad had multiple PhDs, but that was too much pressure to follow so I did my own thing. Ten years I've been a self-employed gardener and perceived as less successful."

Focus group participant

"I came into this line of work quite late and had to fast track. I've been fortunate and have had opportunities. I reject the idea of having to do certain things by certain ages."

Focus group participant

"How would you measure success? I guess it depends what it means to you. If you want to be the CEO of a big company, with a massive house, massive garden, massive car, then that's it for you. It's definitely not about money, for me. Being appreciated by people, having health, and being able to stand on your own two feet. If I have food in my belly and a roof over my head, then I'm happy."

Male, outdoor education supervisor, formerly in a professional role

Participants also sought to redefine what they saw as society's concept of failure, saying that this should only be applied to certain extreme circumstances such as criminality or wasted privilege. Instead, people found explanations or extenuating circumstances to explain their, or other people's, 'failure'. This included adverse childhood experiences, family background, educational opportunities, poor health or a lack of job opportunities.

"[The concept of failure is] too broad. There are other things you need to take into account. Are you doing well enough in another area of your life, personal, career? A big element is being financially stable. Can you support yourself? Do you have money for a rainy day?"

Focus group participant

This desire for a more holistic understanding of someone's unique situation, the rejection of more traditional conceptions of success, and a shift towards a broader and more nuanced view of status, is a recurring theme in this research. The finding that around one-fifth to one-quarter of UK adults aged 30–59 are downwardly mobile makes this redefinition an important consideration for our future understanding of social mobility.

Conclusions

- Relative social mobility is an important and necessary feature of society – for some people to move upwards, others have to move downwards.
- Downward mobility takes many forms – people can shift between occupations, occupational groupings or different levels of income. All shifts are closely interlinked but further exploration is needed to fully understand the nature of these dynamics.
- Downward mobility tends to be a persistent state and most people (80%) identified as downwardly mobile remain so after five years. In the UK, 21% to 24% of people aged 30–59 experienced downward mobility between 2014 and 2018.
- Occupational downward mobility is defined as movement between occupational groupings. However, there seems to be a shift in the public narrative, moving beyond focusing solely on occupation and indeed recalibrating the type of status attached to different occupations.
- Participants in our research felt that society had traditionally defined success according to a narrow conception of status, and as a final destination. Instead, participants described how ideas of success could constantly evolve throughout a lifetime. The evolving nature of success means that people's perceptions of downward mobility and their experiences are also individual and change over time.
- The factors shaping the experiences of downward mobility are discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

2. Changing gears

Key findings

- Downward mobility takes many forms: parental occupation, sector, education and choice (operating within the context of societal constraints) all impact on the likelihood of becoming downwardly mobile. Individuals can choose to shift careers and start a different occupation. However, there are those who are forced to move involuntarily and face structural barriers preventing them from moving on. Further to this, we were able to group participants with similar experiences of downward mobilities into three broad categories. Some participants we spoke to felt content with their situation, satisfied with their choices and the opportunities available to them. Some saw their status as temporary and were planning to move on to a higher-status job as soon as circumstances allowed. Others were adjusting to their newly found status and recalibrating their options or seeking a new identity that fit their current situation.
- People experiencing downward mobility were also more likely to end up in certain sectors. These varied, but the most common sectors that downwardly mobile men moved to were administration, printing and design, leisure and travel, and the police, fire service or military. For women, these were most likely to be occupations in retail, social care and cleaning.
- Downward mobility is highest for children of those working in occupations that have tended to become more graduate-led over time (such as nursing, policing and the military). The children of people in these roles may not have been able to access similar occupations to their parents without going into higher education.
- This suggests that there are knock-on consequences across generations, with people moving down to particular occupations and then children whose parents worked in these occupations moving down themselves.
- Those who lived in poverty or had experienced serious financial insecurity or constraints had to prioritise making ends meet, and their wellbeing and quality of life suffered as a result. The experiences of those living above the breadline were very different, and money was seen as something that was weighed in the balance with other factors.
- Where people had a basic level of income, their overall sense of satisfaction with their lives was shaped by how much freedom and capability they felt they had to make changes and to pursue a range of available options. Participants with lower-status jobs were more satisfied with their lives if they had a sense of achievement, freedom and greater ability to make choices. They often seemed more satisfied than those with a higher occupational status who felt 'stuck' in their situation, with no scope or opportunity to change.

Introduction

Although more than one in five individuals experience downward mobility, little is known about the experiences of those in lower occupational groupings than their parents. The focus has been on upward mobility, and evidence from our focus groups shows that there is a perception that society has a ‘fear of falling’. This suggests that, on the face of it, downward mobility might be assumed to be an undesirable experience or even a failing.

But this is not the case for all. Our findings highlight that some individuals choose lower occupational groupings voluntarily and are satisfied with their outcomes. There is no evidence to enable us to quantify the proportion of individuals who are moving between occupational groupings voluntarily or involuntarily, and further work is needed before we can fully understand this issue.

Narratives about what constitutes success, failure and even social mobility are continuously evolving. Participants we spoke to did not always see themselves as downwardly mobile, rarely considering how their occupational status compared with that of their parents. They also felt that any comparisons should be much broader than just occupation, taking into account a wide range of factors covering disposable income, quality of life and life experiences. While participants felt that society as a whole had a ‘fear of falling’, those who were downwardly mobile did not always see downward mobility as a negative. These individuals were satisfied with their life choices and outcomes. The experiences of individuals experiencing ‘involuntary’ downward mobility are further discussed in Chapter 3.

People’s experiences were subjective and individual, but there were common factors that influenced how they felt about their situation. The actual picture was far more nuanced than a simple focus on wealth or occupational status. A sense of control, choice and satisfaction often had a more profound impact.

The findings in the rest of this report are drawn from the interviews with individuals who were classified as occupationally downwardly mobile. This chapter is split into three sections and explores:

- what downward mobility looks like across society as a whole
- the factors that impact on how satisfied or dissatisfied individuals are
- common experiences of downward mobility

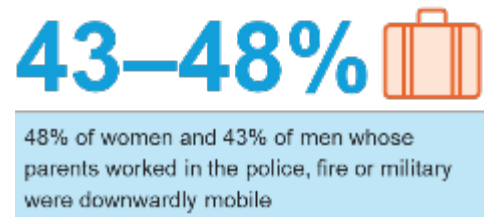
What does downward mobility look like across UK society?

Types of work can be divided into three major occupational categories: professional jobs (accounting for almost 50% of working-age adults); intermediate jobs (about 30%); and routine or manual jobs (a further 20%). We define downward mobility as being in a lower occupational grouping than your parents. Expansion of the professional groupings, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, increased chances of upward mobility. In more recent years, the share of individuals in these major categories has been more stable, with largely offsetting levels of upward and downward mobility.

Between 2014 and 2018, 21% of men and 24% of women aged 30–59 experienced downward mobility, and certain groups were more likely to do so than others (as discussed below and in Chapter 3). The most common factors contributing to the likelihood of experiencing downward mobility were:

Parental occupation

Among those who had professional upbringings, children of nurses, police officers, firefighters and people in the military were the most likely to experience downward mobility. In particular, 48% of men and 40% of women whose parents worked in nursing were experiencing downward mobility. This is notable as these are occupations that have tended to become more graduate-led over time, and therefore, children might not have been able to access similar occupations to their parents without going into higher education.²¹



Downward mobility tends to be lowest for children whose parents had occupations such as doctors, lawyers, teachers and scientists.²² These are occupations that have been graduate-led for a much longer period of time.

Status of job

There were more downwardly mobile people in routine or manual jobs than intermediate jobs. For example, 59% of men and 61% of women in routine and manual jobs were downwardly mobile, compared with 31% of men and 35% of women in intermediate jobs. To some extent this is to be expected, as there is more scope to move down to routine or manual occupations from all other groupings.

Sector

People who were downwardly mobile were more likely to end up working in certain sectors than others. These varied, but the most common sectors for men working in intermediate occupations were administration, printing and design, leisure and travel, and the police, fire service or military.

In addition, children of parents in certain occupations (such as police officers, firefighters and military) were the most likely to become downwardly mobile.

The picture is slightly more complex for women. Among women in intermediate occupations, downward mobility was highest for those working in construction, printing and design, and (again) the police, fire services or military – but these are relatively uncommon occupations for women, employing around 1% of women in total. More than half of women in routine or manual

²¹ Other research has also pointed to the increase in share of those in certain occupations with a degree. See: Cribb, J., Disney, R. and Sibieta, L. (2014), The public sector workforce: Past, present and future, Institute for Fiscal Studies briefing note, 14 February, available at: www.ifs.org.uk/publications/7113; Winsor, T.P. (2011), Independent Review of Police Officer and Staff Remuneration and Conditions: Part 1 Report, London: The Stationery Office, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/229006/8024.pdf

²² See Table 3.11 in the technical report for full details and explanation.

occupations work in retail, social care and cleaning. These occupations have average levels of downward mobility but will absorb more downward mobility by virtue of employing large numbers of women.²³

This suggests that there are knock-on consequences across generations:

- there are people whose parents worked in certain occupations (such as police officers, firefighters and military) moving down to lower occupational groups
- there are certain sectors that people experiencing downward mobility are more likely to work in, such as administration, printing and design, leisure and travel, and the police, fire service or military for men; and retail, social care and cleaning for women²⁴

One hypothesis suggests that as some of these occupations (such as nursing, policing and the military) became more graduate-led over time, children of these parents might not have been able to access similar occupations to their parents without going into higher education. In addition, downward mobility tends to be lowest for those whose parents worked as doctors, lawyers, teachers and scientists. These are occupations that have been graduate-led for a much longer period of time, suggesting a further strong link to the role of formal educational qualifications. Further research is required to understand the mechanisms driving the large differences in downward mobility across specific occupations. This would require data and information on the changing nature of these occupations over time, such as the education and skill requirements.

Age and life stage

Overall levels of downward mobility were highest for people in their 20s. This is likely to be because they were relatively new to the workforce. Their occupational status settled when they reached their mid-30s and remained fairly stable throughout their life, with limited movement into higher- or lower-status jobs.²⁵ The reasons behind this lack of movement (upwards or downwards) once people reach their mid-30s are explained further in Chapter 3.

Education

Overall, the higher someone's educational attainment, the less likely they were to become downwardly mobile, regardless of their parent's occupation. People with A levels (or equivalent) were less likely to have lower occupational status than their parents than those with GCSEs (or equivalent) were, and those with degree-level qualifications were less likely to be downwardly mobile than those with A levels (or equivalent).



Men and women with degrees are
40–50 percentage points
less likely to experience DSM than those
with qualifications below GCSE level

The type of subject also mattered. Individuals with degrees in arts, languages and design were more likely to become downwardly mobile than those studying medicine, education or maths/computing. These patterns remained even when early life skills and occupational origin

²³ See Tables 3.11 to 3.12 in the technical report for full details and explanation.

²⁴ Please see Table 3.12 in the technical report for full details and explanation.

²⁵ Please see Figure 3.1 in the technical report for full details and explanation.

were taken into account.²⁶ This suggests that formal qualifications might give individuals something that makes them more resistant to a shift to a lower occupation, irrespective of their ability (such as underlying skill levels observed during childhood). This is explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

However, education is not the only contributing factor, and individual experiences and equality of choices are dependent on a wider range of factors discussed below.

Money matters: The role of income

People's experiences of downward mobility were subjective and not solely influenced by their assessment of how much income or wealth they had, how 'important' their job was or how much better than their parents they were doing.

Those who lived in poverty or had experienced financial insecurity had to prioritise making ends meet, and their wellbeing and quality of life suffered as a result. They also felt that their financial insecurity had restricted their choices. In childhood, they had limited educational opportunities and often could not pursue further or higher education, attend paid-for school trips or take part in extra-curricular activities, which restricted their opportunities in later life. Some were forced to start working at an early age and take on jobs out of necessity rather than interest.

The experiences of those living above the breadline were very different; money was seen as something that was weighed in the balance with other factors. Those who did measure their success by income felt a profound sense of failure and lacked self-worth as a result of working in low-status or low-paid jobs. However, a more dominant theme was that people were keen to distance themselves from the idea of wealth being the sole marker of success.

"Some people are driven by money, some people are driven by happiness and stability. I think the kneejerk reaction is money, but you can be so unhappy in a job that's stressful and so pressured but you're only staying purely because it's a paid thing. When you really dig deep, I think it is happiness and stability, and feeling valued and like you're achieving, because money is secondary to all that. As long as you can get by, you shouldn't worry about it." Female, supermarket worker, parent was an accountant

Participants often spoke about being able to get by, and felt satisfied as long as they had 'enough' money to:

- feel in control of what they spent money on
- access the opportunities and experiences that they wanted to (such as holidays and affording travel to access wider job opportunities)
- have the stability to seize opportunities, as they were not worried about falling into debt

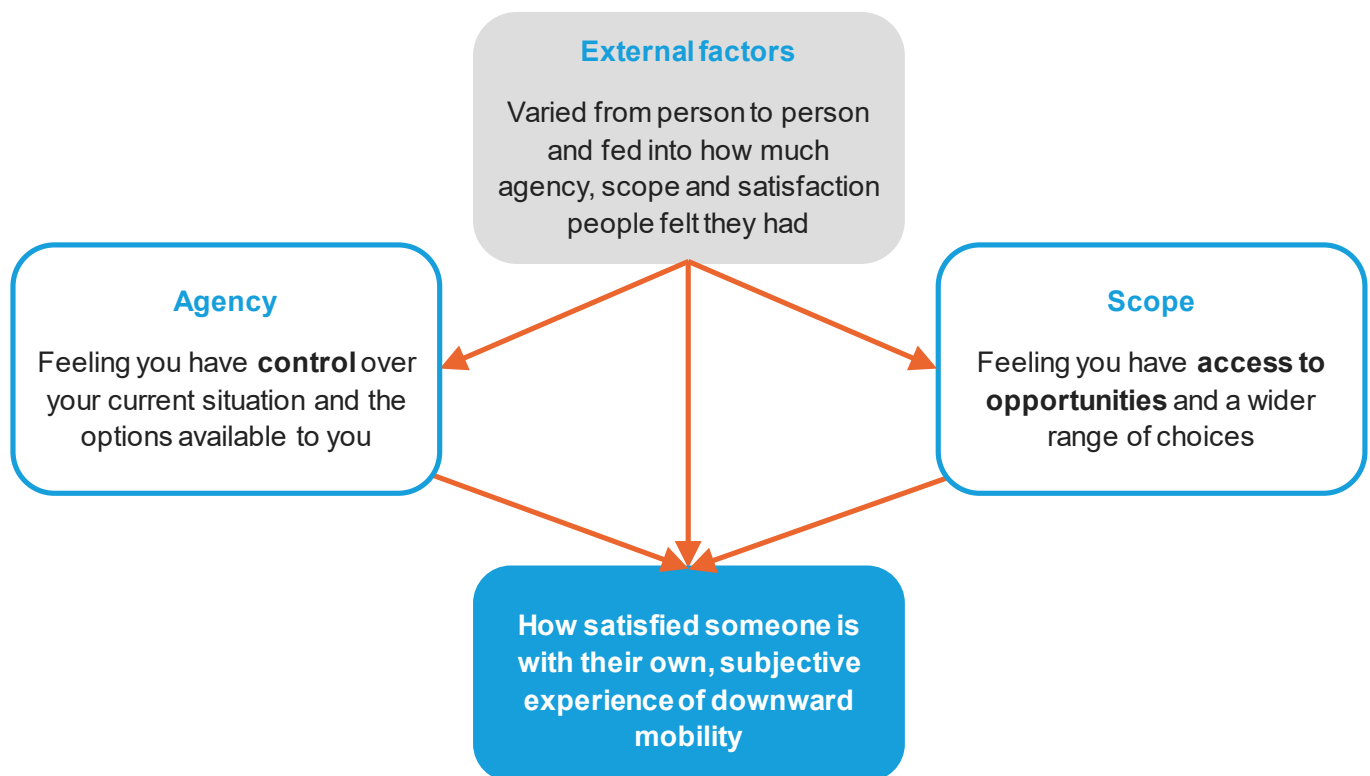
²⁶ Early skills include measures of cognitive abilities (general abilities, maths and reading) and non-cognitive skills (Rutter scores of internalising and externalising behaviours) at age 10/11.

Beyond financial status and wealth: Agency, scope and satisfaction

Both focus group and interview participants felt that society linked success with higher status and pay and subsequently judged those in low-income or low-status occupations. Those who were downwardly mobile described this feeling of judgement, even where they were satisfied with their job. The research has therefore shown that an assumption that low-status work or low income leads to poorer life experiences is too simplistic.

People's overall sense of satisfaction with their lives was shaped by how much freedom and capability they felt they had to make changes and to pursue a range of available options. We refer to this as a sense of agency and scope. As shown in Figure 2.1, their sense of agency and scope was influenced by a range of external factors, such as social or economic conditions.

Figure 2.1: Factors impacting on subjective experiences of downward mobility



People in low-status or low-income jobs were satisfied with their circumstances where they felt greater agency and scope in other areas of their lives. Likewise, some with higher incomes were less satisfied if they lacked control or felt as though their options were restricted. For example, one woman had left a high-status and stressful job as it was adversely affecting her health and relationships. She had taken a lower-paid and lower-status job in a call centre and felt that she had greater control over how she spent her time as a result. Previously, she felt unable to “leave her job at the door”, was constantly thinking about work and felt she was struggling to conceive due to the stress she faced. She described being far happier and healthier as a result of the job move and had managed to have two children with her partner.

What external factors give people agency and scope?

There were a range of factors and considerations impacting on how people saw themselves. They were all personal to the individual, and they worked together to shape how much agency,

scope and satisfaction people experienced in their lives as a whole. These factors helped to show how overall wellbeing could be gained through more than just work. For example, those who lacked agency in their working environment (they might have a low-status, low-paid role that did not interest them in order to make ends meet) could feel a strong sense of satisfaction in other areas that gave them agency and a sense of control, such as hobbies they had outside of work, raising their family or connection with their local community).

“It’s very boring and repetitive. Your colleagues get you through the day because it’s like working in a factory. It’s routine, it’s mundane. You get through it because it’s a must. You’ve got to do what it takes to keep your children fed ... I’m stuck doing a job where the hours suit, because I have to get the kids to school, the single biggest thing is having to work around my family ... I’m going to get emotional ... I’m proud, despite the fact they’ve been brought up by a single mum, that they’ve grown up to be funny, polite, awesome children, and I did all that.” Female, NHS support worker, parent worked as a regional manager in an insurance firm

The main factors impacting on perceptions and experiences of downward mobility are shown in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2: External factors that contribute to agency and scope

How does it feel to be downwardly mobile?

As discussed earlier, experiences of downward mobility were subjective, as were expectations about the permanency or temporary status of people's situations. Some did not see themselves as downwardly mobile, while others felt constrained by factors beyond their control. The most common subjective experiences of downward mobility were:

- those who were satisfied with their situation ('content')
- those who planned to move up an occupational status ('temporary')
- those who acknowledged their status might be permanent and were adapting to their circumstances ('adjusting')²⁷

Content downward mobility

Some participants did not see themselves as downwardly mobile and were fully content and satisfied with their circumstances. For them, their move was more of a career shift. They enjoyed the job they were doing irrespective of its occupational grouping and did not aspire to move into a higher-status role.

Those content with their circumstances:

- were more likely to feel they had agency over their situation and the options available to them, as well as the ability to make choices that were right for them; they felt that their lives were well balanced, with everything where it needed to be in terms of work, childcare, commitments and their routine
- lacked constraining factors, so they did not feel pushed into or trapped in their current situation; instead, they felt a strong sense of scope, agency and freedom to make a choice, tended to have some degree of financial security and were not being forced to make choices that were driven by their personal finances
- were satisfied with elements of their life such as their job, home ownership, material wealth or 'softer' factors such as family, support networks, connection to the wider community or their hobbies

When selecting people to take part in the research, we put a cap on annual income²⁸ and additional income.²⁹ We did this to limit the number of people taking part who had become downwardly mobile but who received additional financial assistance (and therefore stability)

²⁷ These groups are not intended to be a comprehensive segmentation of downwardly mobile individuals. They are subgroups emerging from the interviews, with similar characteristics affecting their subjective experiences. These groups exist within the study population and may not be representative of the wider downwardly mobile population. Quantifying the share of the population falling into different categories of downward mobility is beyond the scope of this work: doing so would require large-scale and detailed data on individuals' lives and labour market histories.

²⁸ This was set at £40,000 (£50,000 in London) but was flexible if participants met a range of other criteria.

²⁹ This included partner's income, income from rental property, support from friends or family, income from benefits, income from dividends, inheritance, savings or any other form of income/financial support outside of the participant's income from work. We ensured that no more than two individuals in each persona group had a combined income (salary plus additional income) of £70,000.

beyond their own income from work. There were still examples of people having financial help from others, but we did not explore this explicitly as it was not a priority for the research.

Those who were content with their situation were able to feel satisfied once their basic needs were met. These included physiological needs (such as having enough food, shelter, clothing and sleep) and safety needs (such as feeling safe, having a job and being in good health).³⁰ When participants did not have their basic needs met, they faced unequal choices, constrained scope and restricted opportunities. This type of downward mobility is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.



Male, outdoor education

Loves his job, regardless of its status or pay

His mother was a hairdresser and gave up working full time when she had children. His father started as an apprentice engineer and later became a lecturer. He struggled with schoolwork as a result of undiagnosed dyslexia and preferred sport and being outdoors to academic subjects. He wanted to leave school at 16 to join the military.

After retiring from a successful military career, he struggled to find work that he really enjoyed at first. He now works in outdoor education and also volunteers with community groups. He described how it felt to finally find another job that he enjoyed and gave him purpose.

“I love doing the job; I’m getting paid to do my hobbies ... I think you get that warm, fuzzy feeling, that you’re doing something you enjoy. If you feel like you don’t want to get out of bed, it’s not the right job. You hear all these people saying, ‘Oh, bloody hell. I’ve got work on Monday’, but I actually really enjoy going to work.”

His current job has a lower status than both his father’s job and his own previous job in the military, and lower pay. Both status and income were unimportant compared to the fulfilment he got from doing a job he loved.

“Money isn’t important at all. I get minimum wage in all the jobs I do, so it’s not about money. I’m in a unique position, though, where money isn’t a problem ... I know I’m going to get at least minimum wage, so it doesn’t matter. I tailor my lifestyle to that.”

Temporary downward mobility

Downward mobility is a permanent status for 80% of people.³¹ But some participants who recognised that their occupational status was lower and planned to move into higher status work as soon as they could saw their current circumstances as temporary. These participants felt satisfied, as their current working status was a result of an active choice. They had a more

³⁰ As explained by Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs’, which presents a five-tier model of human needs as follows:

- basic needs: physiological needs (air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing) and safety needs (personal security, employment, resources, health, property)
- psychological needs: belongingness and love needs (intimate relationships, friends) and esteem needs (prestige and feeling of accomplishment)
- self-fulfilment needs: self-actualisation (achieving one’s full potential including creative activities)

³¹ Please see Figure 5.2 in the technical report for full details and explanation.

aspirational mindset and felt that it was within their power to eventually move back or up to a higher-status occupation.

They often felt they had more scope to change their circumstances and the agency to do so. They tended to have educational qualifications beyond school level or previous experience in a professional role that helped them to feel that they could change their occupational status once they were ready to.

They felt that their situation was temporary because they had access to:

- alternative work opportunities – living in an area with a wider choice of jobs that worked with their other commitments, and gave them sufficient income
- childcare (if relevant) – local, affordable childcare combined with flexible working arrangements enabled parents to have more choice over how they balanced work and childcare
- financial resources such as additional income from a partner, inheritance, pension or savings enabled these participants to choose a lower-paid role while still maintaining the standard of living they were accustomed to

These participants believed their circumstances were temporary and it was within their scope to make a change. However, their perceptions could change if they faced limitations or constraints. They sourced their satisfaction in part from their work but also from other areas of their life, such as raising a family. Where participants felt they were in control and satisfied, work became a less important source of recognition.

Female, self-employed



May move back to a professional role when her children are old enough

She had a comfortable and happy childhood initially but struggled to settle following a move to the UK when she was at primary school. Her mother stayed at home with the children and later moved into secretarial work, and her father worked away from home regularly as a geologist. She did well at school, staying on for A levels and then going to university.

After university she had a few temporary jobs before working in the hospitality sector, where she worked her way up to a senior role. She stopped working there when she had her first child, as she wanted to spend time with them and felt unable to manage the commute and long hours with childcare.

“I want to be the one who brings my children up. I worked with a lady who was brilliant at her job and a brilliant mum, but her parents did breakfast, took the kids to school, collected them, did dinner. She was at work the whole time. That was the reason I didn’t go back after maternity. She was my manager and I knew that that was what she expected of me. It wasn’t what I wanted.”

She decided to become self-employed, in a role that gave her a good balance between raising her children, financial stability and doing a job that made a difference to other people. Though she loved her job and was proud of what she had achieved, she explained that she did sometimes fall back on her previous status and she was considering going back into the hospitality sector, or another high-status job, once her children were old enough.

“Even though I’ve been saying that it’s all about how happy you are, rather than financial rewards, I’m definitely very keen to say I’ve been a senior manager, ‘Not just a manager, I was a senior manager.’ I do respond. Everybody responds to that. Sometimes, when I’m trying to explain why I’m doing the job I’m doing, I say, ‘I’m self-employed and it works for the kids’, rather than saying that I really enjoy having a job that makes me think, gets me out of the house and that I enjoy. I don’t want to be put at the bottom of the pile. I might not be at the top of the ladder, but no one wants to be worst-off, with the least money, the least education and least respect.”

Adjusting to downward mobility

Some participants recognised that they were working in low-status jobs, were in difficult financial situations, or were not fulfilling their hopes and potential. They wanted to change but did not feel they could. This was due to their mindset or structurally constraining factors. Some may have initially felt that their situation was temporary but over time had realised it was unlikely to change. Therefore, they assumed that they had to adjust to their ‘new normal’ and either resigned themselves to this and accepted their status or found alternative coping strategies (see Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: Examples of adjustment to downward mobility

Accepting new status

These participants were dissatisfied with their current situation but felt unable to change it. In the interest of moving forwards, they described becoming resigned to their situation and trying to make the best of it – striving to form new identities or adjusting their expectations in order to feel greater agency, scope and satisfaction with their situation.

Coping strategists

These participants struggled to adjust to their current situation. They spoke about having made choices and tried to make themselves sound more empowered but had notable inconsistencies in their views. For example, they might initially claim that education, work and status did not matter but then ‘let slip’ how important it was to them.

This group did not feel that they could change their working status. Some had previously tried and failed. Others felt it was too late to make a change or that they could not risk their current job and start from scratch as others were dependent on their income. Others had qualifications but failed to find a role within their specialism and felt unable to choose an alternative path or capitalise on wider opportunities. Some participants faced health issues that limited their scope and ability to work but were not able to retrain or find employment with flexible conditions.

Male, call centre worker

Taking a temporary job to make ends meet

He had a happy upbringing, despite moving around a lot as a child, due to his father’s job. His mother worked in administration before staying at home to raise the children. He started experiencing health issues, which lead to him finishing school with only a few GCSEs. Despite this, he went to college, did some temporary work for an insurance company and was recruited to work there full time, working his way up to a team manager role. He made the



decision to leave the company after 10 years, as he wanted a job that made him feel like he was making a difference.

“Considering how much time you spend doing that job, it’s got to be worthwhile. I really do not see the point in putting so many hours of your life every day into something that has no meaning for you.”

He eventually started work as a careers tutor. He found this work rewarding but became frustrated with the lack of career progression. He decided to become self-employed in an educational role, but a lack of confidence and knowledge on how to promote himself and his business led to him running out of money to finance the venture. As a result, he found a job in a call centre to help bring in enough money to support himself and continue to try to build the business. He had been working in the call centre for longer than originally planned and was starting to feel disillusioned.

“The job I’ve got at the moment is supposed to be a filler job ... It was literally just a job to bring in a little money, while I was trying to build my own self-employed business. That’s not gone very well, so now, I’m a bit stuck.”

Conclusions

- There are many forms of downward mobility: some people choose to move careers voluntarily and are content with their choices while others are forced to shift involuntarily and are not able to move on or move up.
- Experiences of downward mobility are subjective: people do not always see themselves as downwardly mobile and use a wide range of factors to measure success. While everyone’s experiences are different, participants could be grouped into three descriptive categories. While some felt content with their situation, believed it was temporary or were finding a new identity, others felt restricted by their circumstances and unable to make a change. This highlights the fact that there is a need to expand the conversation away from ‘moving down’ or ‘falling’ to include circumstances where an individual simply chooses to change occupations. Any structural barriers preventing people from making a change need to be fully examined and acted on.
- Satisfaction with life, wellbeing, health, and a sense of achievement and fulfilment are much more important to some than material success and possessions.
- Some were doing similar jobs to their parents and therefore did not feel any different in terms of status. There were also examples of parents retraining and taking on higher-status roles in later life after their children left home. The children did not associate their parents with a higher occupation (and again, those who stayed in similar occupations to their parents’ primary occupation did not see themselves as downwardly mobile).
- Scope and agency as well as other factors shaped how they saw themselves; however, there are notable structural limitations, such as lack of guidance and support, caring responsibilities or racial prejudice, that lead to inequality and restricted opportunities. These issues are explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Case study: Anne Rolfe, 40, Long Stratton

Anne Rolfe is a married mother of two living in Norwich. She grew up in a middle-class household; her father worked as a geologist and her mother as a secretary in a legal firm.

Anne attended a girls' private school, where she did well academically, and then went to university to study American literature.

After her degree, Anne found work with an events agency, where she worked her way up to senior accounts manager. She stayed there for 14 years.

"Now I'm a Slimming World consultant. I didn't want to do all the hours and travel involved with working in my events agency when I had children. So I became self-employed."

Following the birth of her children, the events company did not allow Anne to change her working pattern, so she decided to leave.

"I had to go to London two or three days a week, and quite often had to spend the night. They were not necessarily flexible about me amending my role to suit the fact I had a young family. I had two children and all of my money would have gone on nursery fees."

She enjoys her new role, citing the increased freedom and flexibility. "I work 20 hours a week running two sessions, and I probably earn about £10,000 a year. It's been a great transition. The money's gone down, but because I'm in control of what I'm doing it's great. I'm hoping to take on a couple more groups to increase my earnings over the next couple of months."

Although her husband has been made redundant, which has had an effect on the family's finances, Anne views her career change very much as a choice and feels it has worked for her.



Case study: Jaye Mills, 37, Bletchingley

Jaye Mills, 37, is a single mother of three who lives in the Bletchingley area of Surrey. Her father was a police officer and business owner, while her mother stayed at home with the children. Her parents built their way up from working-class backgrounds, and she describes her childhood as comfortable.

Jaye remembers treats such as a birthday present of a second-hand computer, and a trip to Disneyland.

“I couldn’t afford to take my kids there now”, she says.

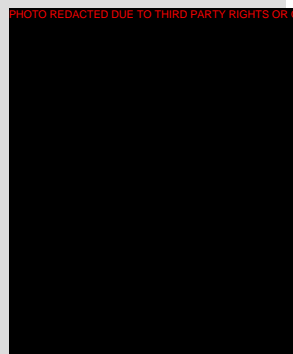
After leaving school at 18, Jaye became pregnant at 21 and describes her life as “grinding to a halt”. The pressure to juggle work and childcare took up most of her energy, and she saw lower-paying jobs as a necessary compromise.

“You’re actually better off having a less pressured job, because at least then the stress isn’t there”, she says. “You clock in, you clock out. You have to weigh up: am I seeing my child less; am I stressed out when I’m seeing them; am I better off financially? Probably not.”

Jaye’s second child was diagnosed with ADHD and autism, which she feels contributed to the break-up of her relationship with her children’s father. She then married and had a third son with her husband, from whom she’s now divorced. Unable to afford a home of her own after the marital breakdown, she moved back in with her parents.

“I left at 18 and moved back in at 32 with three kids. It was a bit of a comedown”, she says.

After a period moving between private rented homes, Jaye now rents from the council, where she has more space and feels less economically stretched. She says that although she recognises her life is less comfortable than her parents’ materially, she is contented.



Case study: Christopher Pitman, 37, Bristol

Christopher Pitman's father worked as manager in engineering. His mother worked nights at a laundry company and the family were able to afford a house and car.

"Engineering has kind of been in the family for years. It always interested me: it's working with your hands.

"Financially, we weren't well off, but we had everything we needed," says Christopher.

Christopher struggled with the academic side at school and, after his AS levels, left to do an apprenticeship in engineering. But when the company he worked for went bust, he found it hard to find another job.

"Unfortunately, a lot of the steelworks and the engineering companies got sold off by the government or went abroad, so a lot of the small businesses disappeared", he says.

"And the big businesses like Rolls Royce tend to hire their own apprentices, not people from outside."

So Christopher switched to working as a self-employed baker.

"Being a baker means you're never going to earn very good money and it's long hours. Whereas in engineering the higher you go, the more you earn. It can pay very good wages."

As an engineer he was earning around £23,000 a year. Now he doesn't always take a wage from his business.

But the move has allowed him to look after his two children, while his wife works full time as a nursery nurse.

"I do all the stuff that most parents aren't able to do", he says.

"We've never had to pay for childcare because I'm always around. I've literally brought them up right from babies. If you're working, you're never going to get that. We might not be financially well off, but we've got a family who are extremely close, and that's worth more than money."

Of course, there are frustrations.

"There's a lot of stress on my shoulders to get orders. And the chance of ever being able to own my own property is really slim because I'm never going to be in a position to save for the deposit. Financially it's very, very hard. But the plus points do outweigh the negative points."

PHOTO REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER REASONS

3. A slippery slope? Involuntary downward mobility

Key findings

- While experiences of downward mobility varied and some chose to change careers, there were individuals who were forced to move to a lower occupation by external factors, and those who faced barriers and were unable to move up.
- Men and women with degrees have 15% chance of experiencing downward mobility, compared with about 30% for those with GCSEs or below. The strong benefits of education persist irrespective of skills or abilities from an early age. This suggests that education itself, and not just academic ability, is a key factor influencing downward mobility. However, education is not the only factor.
- Many told us that family background and early life experiences had an enduring effect on their adult life, both positive and negative. Parental aspiration, support with school achievement or negative childhood experiences all shaped people's lives and how they perceived their own scope, agency and satisfaction at a later age.
- For some, downward mobility was less a matter of choice and more a result of constrained scope and restricted opportunities. These restrictions often began early in life and could have ongoing repercussions. This suggests that structural inequalities exist within the workplace as well as the wider employment market.
- There are groups of people, such as migrants from ethnic minority backgrounds, women with caring responsibilities and people with health conditions or disabilities, who are much more likely to experience downward mobility, have less access to equal choices and are less able to fulfil their potential.

Introduction

This section of the report discusses the way in which structural inequalities took effect throughout the course of people's lives, beginning in childhood and continuing through adolescence and into adulthood. We find that education matters: both qualitative and quantitative research demonstrates its crucial role in downward mobility. However, adverse childhood experiences, lack of support and financial constraints result in unequal access to opportunities. Migrant status and disabilities or health conditions presented profound barriers to

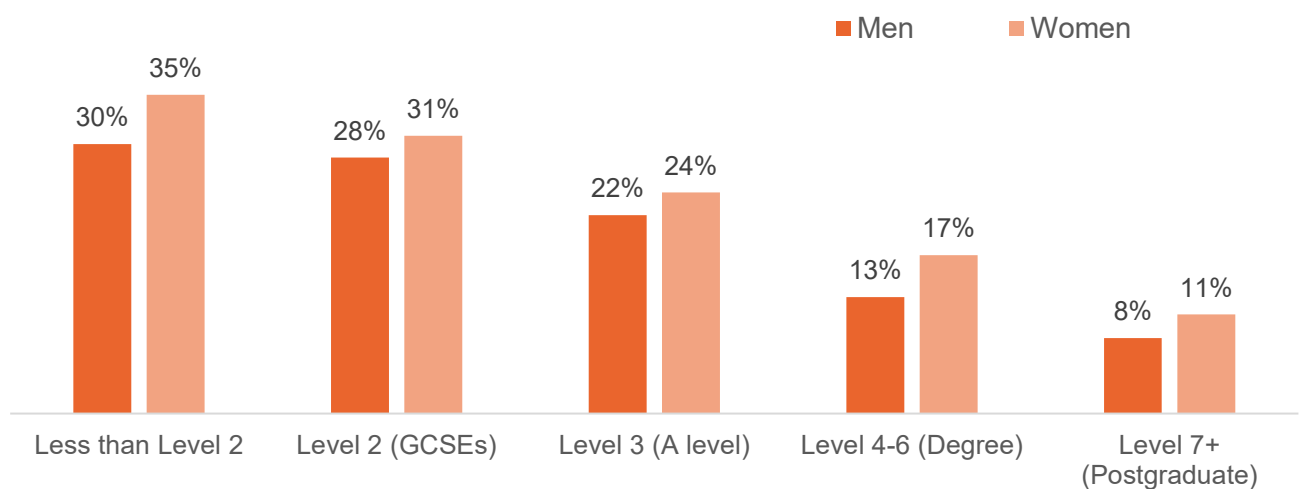
progressing in work. Becoming a parent restricted access to opportunities for many, as did an unwelcoming climate in the workplace.

This section describes how these inequalities impacted on people in our research, influencing the scope of opportunities available to them and their ability to access or pursue them.

Education matters

Efforts to improve social mobility in the UK have focused on education, and there is evidence that this is a critical factor influencing people's chances of becoming downwardly mobile. Those with degrees have a 15% chance of experiencing downward mobility, as compared with about 30% for those with GCSEs or below (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Patterns of downward mobility by educational qualifications



Source: Authors' calculations using the LFS.

As discussed in Chapter 2, higher degree classifications, and studying subjects like medicine, teaching or science, further reduce the chances of downward mobility. The effects of educational qualifications are only slightly reduced when accounting for early life skills such as writing, reading, numeracy or general ability (IQ).³² While a significant advantage in a child's early life skills results in only a slightly reduced chance of downward mobility (5–10%), achieving any formal qualification results in a much lower chance of downward mobility (20%). This suggests that the qualification itself, and not just academic ability, is one of the key factors influencing downward mobility. This reflects the importance that employers attach to degree-level qualifications when selecting candidates for higher occupational roles; using degrees to distinguish job-applicants potentially excludes those with high potential but lower educational qualifications.

Our research showed a range of ways in which education helped to support people, providing benefits beyond the opportunities afforded by higher levels of qualification. Education, especially higher and further education, provided confidence, soft skills and a sense of belonging in the workplace. Those who had a higher level of education also tended to approach

³² Based on cognitive and psychometric testing.

life's set-backs with greater confidence and resilience. This was notable when we discussed career challenges. Those with a higher level of educational attainment were more able to think strategically in terms of alternatives that might be open to them. They had a broad range of skills that they were able to draw upon beyond their qualification. There was a sense that education provided an endorsement of their skills and capabilities, enabling them to approach opportunities with confidence.

“Self-confidence. The fact that I saw myself as marketable. I had the confidence and peace of mind to not be afraid of any situation. It didn’t come instantly, I came out of uni, got that job in the NHS. Within myself I was confident to be in any environment in front of any type of person, regardless of seniority and be able to hold my own. I knew I had the basic intelligence from my university degree to be able to be comfortable amongst other academics.” Male, administrator, parent was a lawyer



Female, landscape gardener

University graduate who feels satisfied with a second career that allows her to pursue her passion

Her parents came to the UK from overseas and had a tough time integrating into society. Her father was a doctor and her mother was a midwife. She attended her local comprehensive school and felt she was performing well academically, but she lacked confidence and this came out as poor behaviour in class. She felt her teachers focused on her behaviour rather than her academic abilities and laughed when she said she wanted to be a teacher.

“They literally laughed. I’m not making it up. This was the words. ‘Ha, you a teacher. Really?’ I can understand because of the naughtiness and in their head those kinds of children don’t achieve. In their head they probably want to say you’re going to end up going to prison or something. That’s what they wanted to tell me but how wrong they were.”

When she left school, she trained and worked as a teacher, which she loved. She went for a promotion a few years into her career but did not get it, partly, she felt, due to racial discrimination and prejudice from other teachers. Eventually the pressures of work, along with having children became too stressful and she left her career to pursue a passion for gardening. She worked as a landscape gardener, and while her work was seasonal, she earned a similar level of income and enjoyed greater flexibility.

She felt no qualms about telling people that she was a gardener but conceded that this might be because she had a teaching qualification at a degree level and still felt pride in this. She acknowledged that for some people, a teacher was seen as much more acceptable than a gardener. Her mother still told people that her daughter worked as a teacher.

“What if you get to 75 and you still tell everybody that’s what you used to do and you don’t have nothing else. How sad is that? Being freelance and being your own boss, the way I’m able to do this and have that flexibility. It’s a modern concept ...”

Even the highly educated, however, were not always protected from powerful factors constraining their potential. For example, degree-educated professional women had been driven to considering lower-status roles by the stressful reality of combining demanding and

inflexible professional roles with parenthood. In another example, a working-class graduate from a rural location had felt that she did not fit in well with colleagues in a graduate job in London, and soon returned home to take up a lower-status job. Highly educated migrants found that their qualifications, although valid in the UK, did not translate into job market success.

By contrast, those with lower or no qualifications lacked the same breadth of opportunities and felt that there was a narrow scope of options available to them. Some of those who had fewer or no qualifications linked this factor, along with other aspects of their circumstances, to a lowered sense of self-worth. Those who lacked qualifications, held a low-status job and had low socio-economic status felt that these combined factors meant that they were judged harshly by society in general, and this could affect mental health and wellbeing.



Female, lone parent working two jobs

Finds satisfaction in her jobs but has low confidence and self-esteem

She grew up with a strong work ethic, learned from both her parents. Her father worked two jobs, and her mother would work evenings after she finished looking after the children.

She did not enjoy school and was bullied throughout about her looks, and she felt her self-confidence had always been low as a result. Since leaving school, she had worked in various jobs, including in her father's small business, as a childminder, and as a nursery teacher. She had often found it difficult to make ends meet.

“Life is [financially] a struggle every day ... I should be working somewhere where I get paid much more money, but I like working where I make a difference to children, to people in general.”

She was training as a hairdresser but gave this up when she had her son at 19. Her son was her proudest achievement because of the person she brought him up to be. She currently worked in a nursery as well as taking cleaning jobs. She loved her job at the nursery and being around the kids and also felt satisfaction from her cleaning job because it helped people. She felt that society judged those with lower-status professions harshly and thought most people dismissed cleaning jobs.

“Cleaners are an important part of society, I think, and a lot of people skip over cleaners. I think it is, like, a society thing. People think, ‘Oh, are you just a cleaner?’ ... I compare myself to my sisters. One of them is a teacher one of them is high up in marketing. They look down on me because I do cleaning. I think that’s just how it is. I think people look down.”

A strong foundation

Many pointed to early life experiences as having had an enduring effect on their later life, both positive and negative. Positive and nurturing family experiences helped to instil emotional resilience, while difficult circumstances and adverse childhood experiences had an ongoing detrimental impact on how individuals perceived their choices and experienced downward mobility.

Parental aspiration

Family dynamics, particularly in relation to siblings, played an important role in how people saw their future prospects, affecting their aspirations and self-esteem. This in turn could have an effect on their sense of agency when seeking out opportunities and their level of aspiration for the future. Parents had often focused their aspirations on other siblings, with the result that participants felt unfairly labelled as less academic, or less success-oriented. This sometimes had a lasting impact, as it affected decision-making around whether to continue in education and which types of jobs to pursue.

“My reports were always quite average, whereas my sisters were very good at this, very good at that. My older sister was good at everything ... I don't think they had much expectation for me. Like I said, I'm the black sheep, so I think they just thought I'd do whatever.” Female, cleaner and after-school carer, parent was a small business owner

Some women described being treated differently from their brothers, as their parents assumed that daughters would have less career potential or would be limited to more stereotypically female job roles.

“It was definitely gender bias. Because he was a boy he was expected to do better than me. Because he went to a posh school he was on a pedestal. My parents did expect more of him because he went there, but the school expected more.” Female, self-employed dog groomer, parent was an army officer

Support with school achievement

Researchers have highlighted the role of opportunity hoarding in restricting social mobility, demonstrating the higher educational outcomes for middle-class children, even where early ability is on a par with their peers in routine or manual occupations.³³ The research points to some privileged parents having a high level of involvement with their children's educational achievement, providing intensive support in order to hothouse their children academically, for example by nurturing cognitive and soft skills during childhood.

Many participants in the research sample for this report had had the opposite experience as children, with a lack of attention and oversight of their progress at school, from either parents or teachers. At school, many recalled that they hadn't been singled out as high achievers, nor had they been targeted as requiring extra support. Either of these labels, they felt, could have resulted in a greater interest in their progress, but the fact that they had not stood out meant that they had gone 'under the radar' and been allowed to drift into achieving below their potential. This lack of interest had left them feeling disconnected from school achievement, and gave them a sense that they could have achieved more, given the right support and guidance.

School had been an unhappy experience for many, and a lack of self-confidence had prevented them from enjoying their time at school or from seeking out help from adults at home or at

³³ Friedman, S. and Macmillan, L. (2017) “Is London Really the Engine-Room? Migration, Opportunity Hoarding and Regional Social Mobility in the UK” *National Institute Economic Review* Vol. 240, pp R58-R72.

school. When discussing their relationship with education, participants often pointed to their family culture around it. Many, especially those who had not achieved well at school, said that their parents had had little or no involvement with their education, nor did they have any expectations about their children's educational achievement. Instead, peers had been the key influence during the school years, and their focus was on integrating socially rather than achieving academically.

"Mum and dad didn't have anything much to do academically with me. If we had parent's evening, they actually wouldn't turn up. They had work commitments, and they weren't interested in going up to that school and finding out how I was doing. They just trusted. They had a report every year. They read it. I was well-mannered. Did well. Did enough for my ability. They were happy with that. They didn't need to go to school to find that out. I didn't care if they went or not. It was just an understanding we had."

Female, dinner lady, parent was a pit manager

"I probably didn't particularly stand out, I was just there, I just got on with it, I didn't give them any bother. I was just quite average. I don't think I would've stood out to them particularly. They probably would've forgotten me by now."

Female, call centre worker, formerly a probation officer

"I've never really wanted to excel beyond where I am. I always seem to do just enough to escape notice, I guess, but not so much that I'm going to shine, just in case I make a fool of myself."

Female, sales consultant, formerly a project manager

"My mum and dad, they put complete trust in the system. They came probably from a stricter background because my grandparents were strict. I think that they did tell me off, I got into trouble. But I still did what I did. I think they thought, 'Oh, she'll settle'."

Female, cleaner, parent was a small business owner

"They tried to encourage you to do (school work), but if you didn't want to do it you didn't. My mum says 'I feel like a failure when you say that', and we say 'don't say that'. But she didn't. I don't think we'd have really listened if she'd have said 'do your homework'. We'd have probably just said no, and that would've been it."

Female, receptionist, parent was a police officer

"Some of the girls were really, really clever. It came naturally. I remember I used to struggle, because I must have a short attention span. I'd get bored."

Female, setting up a café, parent was a teacher

For some, school had been a particularly difficult experience as a result of serious issues, such as undetected learning difficulties or bullying. Those who had experienced this had often not received any support from family or school.

“There was the dyslexia. I never really brought it up with (my parents). My mum never really forced me to do my homework because I didn’t like doing it because of the dyslexia. I never stopped to do my homework, it was always rushed the day before or in class in school.”

Male, assembly worker, parent was a pit manager

“You do feel it...We ended up playing football with lads we met from school and someone would come along and, ‘Here comes the council estate lot’. They didn’t send me away though because we went to the same school... people used to say stuff, if you had arguments with them, they would say, ‘go back to your own country’. I said I was born in England though.”

Male, supermarket cashier, parent was a business owner

“I might get a bit emotional, I’m 47 years old and it’s still really clear. I didn’t go off the rails but I didn’t stay in education because of it. That’s sad. I was okay until I think it was the last two years of school. It was a big gang of girls that just made life really difficult. They’d hang around outside classes, I have social anxiety now anyway which I probably had at the time. I can just remember leaving school, obviously with GCSEs, I probably should have gone back and resat a few of them because I’m not stupid by any means but I didn’t do overly well, probably because of the bullying. I just decided that further education wasn’t for me because I didn’t want to be in that environment again.”

Female, support worker, parent was a regional manager

Negative childhood experiences

A number of participants had experienced difficulties in their childhood home, such as poverty or growing up in a home where they witnessed domestic abuse. Some had experienced the death of a parent. These childhood experiences had sometimes had the effect of narrowing opportunities, limiting capacity to think of the future and meaning there was a need to take financial responsibility at a young age.

“Mum and dad used to work full time, and sometimes it was really tough. There was no dinner money. There was food in the house, but mum and dad could only give me what they had.” Female, landscape gardener, formerly a teacher

Female, 32, lone parent, working for a charity

Always wanted to help people but received poor careers advice and now feels stuck



As a child, her parents worked in low-income jobs and she witnessed domestic violence and alcoholism at home. As a result of this, she grew up quickly and with a lot of responsibilities from a young age. She changed schools before her GCSEs and found that not knowing anyone meant she just got on with her work.

“I wanted to do well, for [my mum]. When I got my GCSEs, and saw how happy she was, it made me think, ‘I’ve got to do this for her’.”

After school, she went to college and worked as a play worker for the city council. She wanted to help people and so then went on to study law at university. She really enjoyed her time at university and was very proud of getting her degree.

She became ill with a condition that affected her physical mobility and meant she was always in pain, dependent on medication and often bedridden. She had to change her job as a result. Although it would be better for her childcare costs if she didn’t work, she wanted to work because she felt it was better for her mental health. She worked sorting donations in a charity

warehouse and felt she was overqualified for the role; it was more of a means for her to pay her bills than a career.

She had a passion for helping people, which is why she worked for a charity. She had wanted to be a social worker or youth worker when she was younger but received guidance that advised her away from this. Now, she felt it was difficult to get into this line of work, as she did not have the right qualifications and could not afford to go back to university.

“The one thing I wanted to do ... was social work. That was right back when I was leaving school, and [career guidance] poorly advised me. No one in my family had ever gone on to higher education, so what they said to me was gospel ... As a result of that, I also missed out on free tuition fees. My mum was a single parent at the time. It was just wrong.”

Finding a path

The time of transition out of secondary school was seen as a defining time of life, setting people on a path for many years and helping to establish a sense of self and a place in the world. Lack of forward thinking at this time was a source of regret, and participants often thought that this had had a lasting impact on their lives.

Support with the transition from school into work or study

There were notable differences in the breadth of opportunities perceived by different participants as they neared the end of school. The key difference was around the path to higher or further education, or into work. For those continuing in education, there was an established path, with set stages and clearly defined milestones. The decision to continue in education had usually been made with the support and advice of adults.

For some, school life was a bind from which they longed to escape, and the thought of earning money and having independence was highly appealing and liberating.

“I remember feeling very grown up when I socialised with my colleagues at work, even though I was the youngest, as they treated me like an adult. I was very confident and chatty, which helped when making friends. I felt like I was a different sort of person. I had opinions. I had people listening to me. I had people asking me things. I felt involved about different things going on in the company, in the office. I felt more of an adult there than I did when I was at home. When I went back home, I was still my mum’s daughter, I didn’t really have to make any decisions. My mum did everything.” Female, shelf-filler, parent was an engineer

However, some had not felt negatively towards further study but had simply not benefitted from adult advice or intervention. As a result, the idea of advancing in education was simply not on their radar. For those not remaining in education, the end of their school days was a time characterised by uncertainty. Many followed their friends into a job, describing their decision-making as arbitrary at best. Many felt that they had drifted into work, without any support, guidance or direction from school or at home. Those who had received support from their parents or teachers had found this period of life far less fearful and uncertain.

“I think I fell into it. I got a part-time job in the summer holidays working at a restaurant. My life hasn’t been firm decisions, it’s always something I’ve stumbled into. I’ve never had a plan. I started a part-time job, kind of enjoyed it and then decided that I was going to carry on working there. It was just a series of falling into jobs that probably really weren’t that great at the time. My biggest regret is not going into further education, not taking A levels and not going to college.” Female, support worker, parent was a regional manager

“Before I worked for my dad’s mate, I went to work for his other mate, who runs a steel erecting company. I worked with him a bit after the first job. After the steel erecting, I did some scaffolding – that wasn’t for my dad’s mate, that was somebody else who I found. After the scaffolding I went into roofing again, for somebody else. Then onto the barn erecting. With any job I had, as soon as I left one, I would go straight into work with another company.” Male, not working (previous occupation: builder), parent was a manager

Longer- versus shorter-term focus

Those who had received adult support to continue in education had also had the ability to look forward into the longer-term future, rather than focusing on the present. Others had been less able to do this. For some, money worries meant that they were unable to defer earning while they studied. For others, eagerness to earn their own money, for spending and to provide a sense of independence, had outweighed any thoughts of continuing in education. Immediately after leaving school, they had focused on the present rather than thinking of the future and thought of their work as a ‘job’ rather than as a ‘career’.

“On Friday, I received my weekly pay and on Saturday, I would go shopping with my friends before we went out to discos that evening. I think now I was probably too young to leave school as they are the best days in your life. And I still believe that. I was probably a bit young.” Female, shelf-filler, parent was an engineer

“I had friends that were a year older. Out of school on the weekends, they’ve got part-time jobs and they’ve got money, and you’re envious. I thought I’d do that, go straight for the money more than going to college. I don’t know anyone that went to uni back then, but everyone went to college, wait a few years. I didn’t fancy another few years in school again.” Male, supermarket cashier, parent was a business owner

There were also those who had experienced disruption during adolescence in the form of a bereavement, or as a result of becoming a parent while at school or soon after leaving school. The increased responsibility that came with these experiences resulted in a change of outlook, with aspirations focused more on day-to-day coping than on longer-term aspiration. Responsibilities could include the obligation to earn money to support a child, or the need to care for and emotionally support a bereaved parent or siblings.



Female, aspiring lawyer who set up a beauty salon

Feels her confidence was negatively impacted by having a child at 17

She grew up in a close-knit family, her father working as a lecturer and her mother as a midwife. Her father instilled confidence in her and made her feel she could do anything. There was a strong emphasis on education from her family, and she was labelled as a 'bright child' and was told she would make a 'fantastic lawyer'.

She had long-term aspirations to be a lawyer, but her life changed when her father passed away. There were still expectations for her to become a lawyer, but this changed when she became pregnant at 17. She felt these caring responsibilities limited her options, as law school would be too demanding to be able to do as well as having a young child.

"My mum was quite disappointed when I didn't pursue law. I didn't go to uni to do law ... I think I felt a bit pressured to do law, and then now I'm kicking myself because I know why they thought I should have been a lawyer ... but when somebody's telling you, it was the encouragement, but it's pressure."

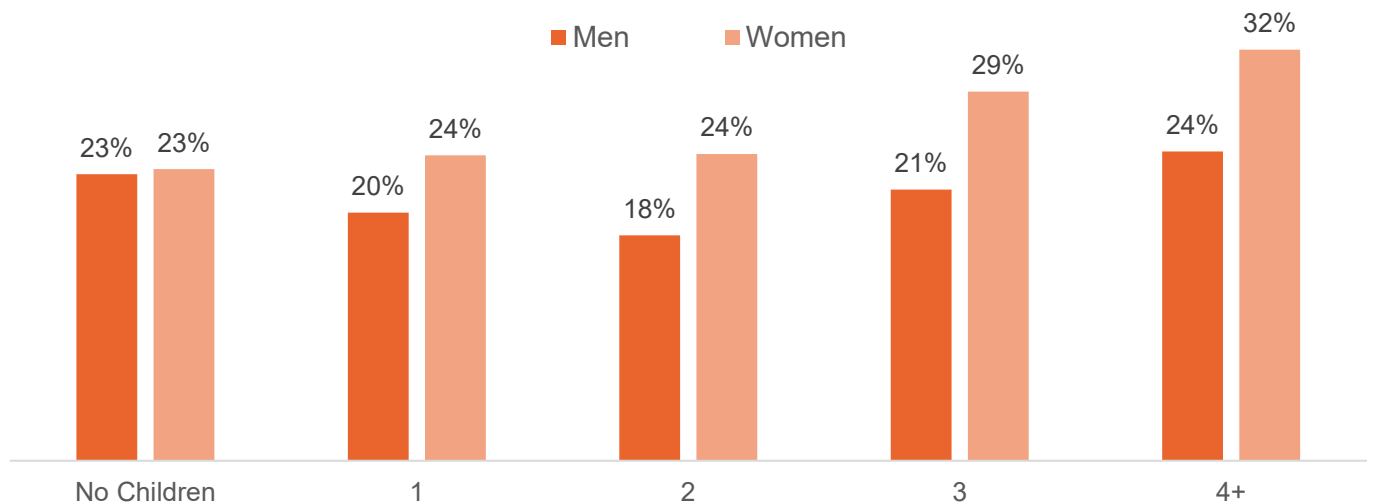
She decided to choose a more flexible career that would allow her to spend more time with her family and worked in the real estate sector. She was made redundant during the 2008/9 financial crisis and retrained as a beautician. She currently owns her own salon but acknowledges that her current career is temporary. Her personal agency and aspiration allowed her to 'bounce back' after each life-changing event to broaden her scope of opportunities.

"Am I fulfilling myself? No. Do I know I can do a lot better? Yes ... It doesn't feel the greatest and I know that my dad would have wanted better for me. He knows I could have been something else, something better ... not just because we're his children but because you need to believe in yourself."

Making life work

Our research shows that women with more children were more likely to experience downward mobility, while number of children had a small or no effect for men. Nearly a third (32%) of women with four or more children experienced downward mobility, compared with 23% with no children. The chances of experiencing downward mobility also rose with each extra child up to four or more children.³⁴

³⁴ Please refer to Table 3.10 and 4.7 in the technical report for a detailed breakdown of the figures.

Figure 3.2: Patterns of downward mobility by number of children

Source: Authors' calculations using the LFS.

While the effects of having more children have declined over time for women, they remain substantial, demonstrating that women continue to disproportionately carry the 'parent penalty' (see Figure 3.2).

Working and caring

For parents – especially mothers, who bore the main childcaring responsibility – flexibility became the primary consideration when choosing a job. A general lack of flexibility in the working patterns required by employers frequently led women to sacrifice higher-status jobs to take lower-status but more flexible roles. Even where employers showed some flexibility, or women had some support with childcare, the stress of combining work and parenthood forced some to rethink their working lives to reduce their level of responsibility.

"I liked my job and it was a good promotion and a good company to work for. But the stress every day of having to make sure that I'd get that train, to get back in my car, to drive, to get my daughter from the nursery was just awful. It was horrible. Because you didn't have any flexibility. And sometimes it's difficult because you're in the middle of something but I'd have to leave. It wasn't easy." Female, shelf-filler, parent was an engineer

"I went with the intention of working there, came up and did the training for two weeks, then got given afternoon shifts, which meant I couldn't get to the nursery in time. My partner worked quite far away. I couldn't carry on with that job, so then it was just the factories." Female, carer, formerly a social care worker

For some, this reduced status was temporary while their children were young, and they intended eventually to return to full-time work in a position of responsibility. For others, the reduced status that they had accepted upon becoming parents became a more permanent state.

Vicious cycle of low wages and long working hours

For some participants, both male and female, the pressure of coping with employers' demands in combination with caring and other responsibilities resulted in a shorter-term horizon, with

decisions made based on immediate needs. A vicious cycle of low wages, long hours, caring for children and a low perceived scope of prospects for career advancement could make life difficult and draining. In these circumstances, it was difficult to plan for the longer-term future. As mentioned previously, downward mobility was often a persistent state (see Chapter 2).

“I used to be on a 40-hour week and do 60 to 80. The element of control is definitely taken from you there. I felt the workload was incredibly hard. I think everyone in my office went off with stress at least once, so that was always quite challenging. Also, they [the employer] would go, ‘Oh, you can do this’, and you’d just be like, ‘Ah, can I?’ So, a lot of faith was put into people who weren’t always as prepared for what they were meant to be doing as they could’ve been. I noticed myself doing that with junior members of staff when I got more experienced, because you just didn’t have the time to fully train people.” Female, sales consultant, formerly a project manager

“The work doesn’t go away, it’s just been doubling – even more, actually. They’ve not been recruiting. It’s become quite stressful ... I’m on tablets for anxiety and depression and you’re just a nervous bloody wreck.” Female, setting up a café, parent was a teacher

Difficult circumstances

Some had experienced serious difficulties in their personal lives during adulthood. These included bullying at work or abuse from partners, including physical, verbal and financial abuse. Some had lived with an addiction, been victims of crime, or faced serious health or mental health problems. Often, mental health crises had been linked to work,³⁵ and people had felt forced to make changes to their lives to maintain their wellbeing. For some, these experiences had resulted in reduced scope, ongoing mental health issues and poor wellbeing.

“The work pressures were too much. There was no job satisfaction any more. I just wasn’t feeling it any more, and it was obviously taking its toll on my home life as well. I wasn’t sleeping particularly well because I was stressed and that has a knock-on effect on my relationship with both my husband and my daughter, so it wasn’t working. It just got to the point where I couldn’t take it any more. My mental health had to come first.” Female, call centre worker, formerly a probation officer

Some are more equal than others

While education or family support had the ability to restrict the scale of downward mobility for some, there were other factors which had a profound effect on individuals’ experiences of downward mobility and, in some instances, amounted to structural barriers.

The quantitative analysis showed that men and women from black and minority ethnic groups were much more likely to experience downward mobility, even after accounting for their educational qualifications and other individual characteristics. This includes individuals from Bangladeshi, Black African and Other Asian backgrounds, and men from Pakistani, Mixed and

³⁵ Harvey, S.B. et al. (2017), Can work make you mentally ill? A systematic meta-review of work-related risk factors for common mental health problems, *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 74, 301–310, available at: <https://oem.bmj.com/content/74/4/301>.

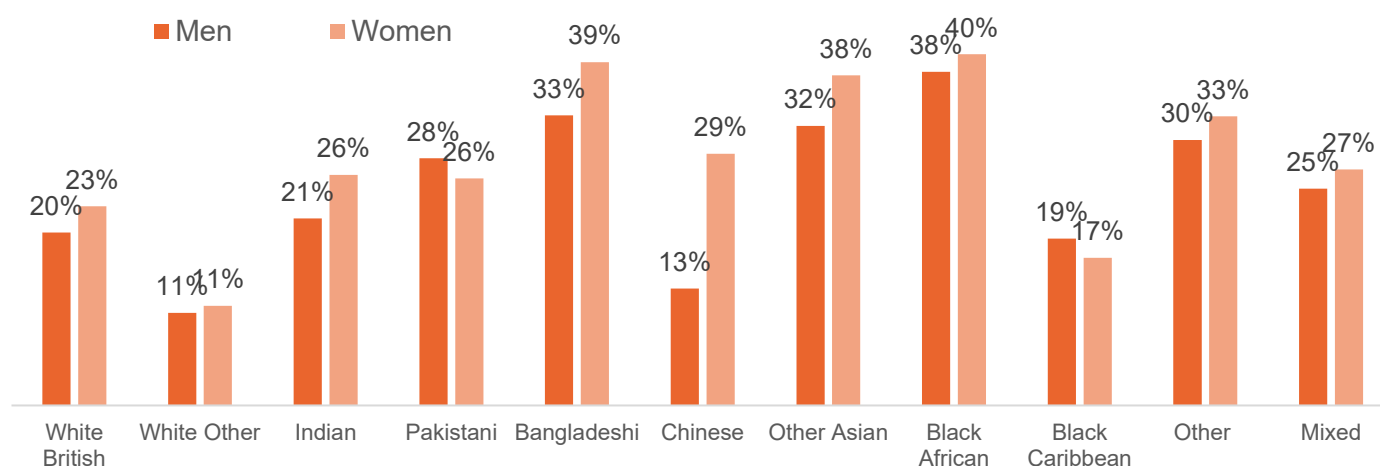
Other backgrounds (see Figure 3.3). These effects were largely driven by individuals born outside the UK. The only exception was individuals from Black Caribbean backgrounds, only 30% of whom were born outside the UK. This is consistent with observed migration patterns from different continents over the past 50 years (the Windrush generation compared with more recent African migration).³⁶

Our research also showed that women, irrespective of their ethnicity, faced a myriad of other limitations often linked to a lack of flexible working conditions and caring responsibilities. It was not possible to isolate the role of ethnicity in their experiences of downward mobility within the scope of this report and available sample sizes. Instead, we focused on two specific ethnic groups, Black African and Bangladeshi men, to allow us to explore their experiences in detail and be able to analyse the results and draw conclusions.

Downward pressure is higher for ethnic minorities

The following section discusses the experiences of those from different ethnic backgrounds. While the quantitative (survey) data covers those from all ethnicities, the qualitative research focused on Black African and Bangladeshi *men* in particular – as the survey data highlighted that people from these ethnic backgrounds who were born outside the UK were disproportionately likely to be downwardly mobile. We decided to focus purely on men, rather than women, in order to better understand the role that ethnicity alone played in experiences of downward mobility. The survey data clearly shows that gender plays a substantial role in downward mobility. Ethnic minorities born outside the UK, particularly those from Bangladeshi, Black African and Other Asian backgrounds, and men from Pakistani, Mixed and Other backgrounds, were about 10–20 percentage points more likely to experience downward mobility than White British workers.³⁷ These effects were concentrated among those born outside the UK, which was the vast majority of adults in these groups.

Figure 3.3: Patterns of downward mobility by ethnicity



Source: Authors' calculations using the LFS.

³⁶ Please refer to Section 4 in the technical report for a detailed breakdown of the figures.

³⁷ Other research has also pointed out racial discrimination in recruitment practices, such as Wood, M. et al. (2009), A test for racial discrimination in recruitment practice in British cities, London: Department for Work and Pensions, available at: <http://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/a-test-for-racial-discrimination-in-recruitment-practice-in-british-cities>.

Ethnicity had a substantial effect on chances of downward mobility, irrespective of educational qualifications. In addition, being born outside the UK increased the chances of downward mobility for both men and women – a factor that was further explored in the qualitative interviews.

Black African and Bangladeshi men who had migrated to the UK faced a wide range of barriers to the scope of opportunities that were open to them:

- unfamiliarity with UK culture and social conventions
- language barriers, or disadvantages because of foreign accent or name
- experiences of prejudice and racism in the job market as well as everyday life
- unrecognised qualifications, and those with valid qualifications overlooked in favour of candidates born in the UK or from other backgrounds
- lack of equal opportunities, for example graduate schemes only open to domestic or European graduates³⁸
- lack of financial resources and stability created financial pressure to take on any employment, irrespective of skill match and ability

As well as these structural barriers, the men interviewed for this research did not have access to help and encouragement from their families and friends and other support mechanisms in their home country. Some felt under pressure to overcome the odds and pursue their life in the UK at all costs, having made the decision to relocate. They had to support their new families in the UK and felt obliged to succeed and make the best of every opportunity. They often accepted jobs with lower wages or were passed over during promotion rounds, forcing them into a vicious cycle of low-paid, unskilled work and long hours. This in turn further limited opportunities to progress or find alternative employment.

“When I was here [in the UK] I said to myself, ‘I will not ask anybody back home for anything. Whatever it takes to survive, I will survive.’ To first understand the system, you have to do a lot of things. Work with people, like help other people’s business, you have to support them, be underpaid and they insult you because of the circumstance. I didn’t have a choice.” Male, health and safety coordinator, parent was a head teacher

We also observed that, compared with British-born participants, for migrant workers from certain backgrounds (particularly Black African, Bangladeshi and Other Asian backgrounds) education had a much weaker protective effect in the experience of downward mobility. Some qualifications were simply not accepted in the UK. Even if the highest qualification (such as a master’s degree) was achieved from a recognised UK university, their background meant that the high qualification did not translate into success in the job market.

“I’ve tried doing graduate schemes, but because I wasn’t a British citizen, I couldn’t get into the graduate scheme here. There were loads of limitations. I’ve had two degrees. I feel like I’ve still got more I can give, but I haven’t got the option. I feel like I’m not

³⁸ All barriers and challenges were self-reported by participants and not verified through official sources.

empowered. I've got the ability, but I haven't got the chance to give that back to society."

Male, call centre worker, highest parental occupation: chemical engineer

The research found examples of different experiences among those from different countries and those who had come to the UK under different circumstances.³⁹ The Nigerian men as well as one of the Bangladeshi men we spoke to came from privileged backgrounds with a strong emphasis on education. They had received, or were still receiving, financial support from their families and had come to the UK to study or further develop their career. Other Bangladeshi men, on the other hand, had moved to the UK with their whole family (parents, grandparents or other relatives). Their parents had decided to move to the UK (on a specific government scheme) to provide a better life and more opportunities for their children, but they lacked the support to enable them to fit in with the new culture. They arrived in a new country, often not able to speak the language or aware of local customs, and there was no provision to explain simple logistics or the legal or schooling systems or to help improve their language skills. In those examples, participants spoke about the pressure to succeed as they felt that their parents had sacrificed their lives for them. They were driven by the need to earn and provide for their family and prioritised employment and security over education or pursuing other opportunities.

"Expectations were really at the back of my mind. I will say I like my job because if I hated it, I wouldn't be doing it every day. I don't love it. I don't wake up in the morning going, 'Yes. I'm a chef'. It pays my bills, it looks after my kids, my family. I've gotten used to it. If I had my own way, I would try a different career." Male, chef, parent was a teacher

Male, call centre worker

Aspiring scientist who had to change his name to get a low-skilled role

His family came from a wealthy background and his father (an engineer) always stressed the importance of doing his best and getting a good education.

"I was second in a class of 27 and came back home happy ... my dad wasn't happy that I was second. His question to me was, 'Why were you not first?' It made me feel that nothing I did was ever going to be good enough. It also made me want to try harder academically, show him that I could be first."

Feeling the pressure from his father, he went to university in Nigeria and moved to the UK to complete his master's degree. He struggled to find a job after graduating because he did not have work experience and was unable to apply for graduate schemes, as they were only open to UK and EU citizens. He had to resort to applying for low-skilled jobs not related to his degrees, but he struggled to get interviews. He views his ethnic origin as a barrier and spoke of experiencing racism and discrimination in the workplace.

"Put it this way, I've never applied for a job with [African name] and got an interview. Never. The same jobs, I'll apply, tweak my CV and apply with [British-sounding name] and I'll get called for an interview immediately. That's a limitation."

He eventually found a job in call centre. He was trying to use his skills and work his way up but was still disappointed he could not work in his field and area of interest. He acknowledged



³⁹ Please note that qualitative findings are based on a small number of participants and are indicative only.

that while he was moving up the ladder, he was still the only person in his department who had been to university. He thought that if he kept doing the things he was doing, then he would continue to progress.

“I have to settle now in this one. What I’ve decided now is that I’m going to make myself the best at what I do now, so ultimately, one day, I become a senior leader in the organisation. That’s my drive.”

Male, warehouse worker



Came to the UK to study for a master’s, having dreamt of living in the UK

His mother had been a teacher in Nigeria, and his father a politician. When he was a child at home, his mother would strongly encourage her children to study. His background was one of privilege, and at school he received special treatment as the child of a member of parliament. After leaving school he sat entrance exams for medical school in Nigeria twice but was not successful.

After graduation, he came to the UK to do postgraduate studies. After graduating with his master’s degree, he found the jobs market highly competitive and was not always treated well by his colleagues. He worked in a variety low-skilled jobs – usually friends helped him to find work. Life was tough, it was difficult to survive financially, and he experienced a relationship break-up, but his determination to settle in the UK kept him going. He was eventually granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK.

“That’s just life. Before coming here, I’ve never done any physical work in my life, never. Now I’ve got no choice. It’s shifted me physically and mentally ... But it’s not going to be like this for life. It’s a phase I have to go through.”

He now worked in a warehouse but resented the racist attitudes he encountered from colleagues and supervisors in his current and previous positions. He recently applied for a promotion and said he had evidence that this had failed as a result of discrimination. He complained to management, and was given a trial period in the promoted position. However, he worried that he would now be unfairly labelled as a ‘troublemaker’.

“My friend has also got a master’s and they blacklisted him because he was outspoken as well. They will look for the most light mistake and that will go on your record. Even where I was before it was the same politics. It’s going to [continue to] be the same, it’s just everywhere. You go to HR, but you can’t win with these guys.”

In spite of these set-backs, he seemed hopeful about the future and continued to look forward to his future in the UK. He was considering applying to train in mental health nursing, as someone he knew from back home had taken this career route.

“I showed them. My father said, ‘Why don’t you come back home?’ I said, ‘No, I’m not coming back’. I’ve come. I believe I have time and God on my side.”



Male, chef

Started work early and got trapped in a vicious cycle of low wages

His family came to the UK when he was 15, on a government scheme bringing Bangladeshi men to work in local factories. His father was a teacher but had to work in a manual role in the UK. The move was a big cultural shock for the family; they did not understand the culture, could not speak the language and did not fit in. They were not given any advice or support and felt very isolated.

“I was struggling to fit, to be honest. Fit in with all the new kids and new culture. The way people lived. I didn’t understand the language. I struggled with that very much. It was quite a culture shock. Everything was different. How people lived, how they married, how they did everything. Coming from a village, it was quite a shock, as well. Used to see guys and girls kissing and drinking, coming out of the pub, falling over. You never saw that in Bangladesh because they don’t have pubs.”

His family put strong emphasis on education but his exams were not recognised in the UK. He was considering further training but got a part-time job in a restaurant at the same time and enjoyed the freedom of having his own income. He stayed in the role and while he enjoyed it, he regretted not pursuing further education and thought his life could have been better. He was aware it was his own decision but thought that if he had had guidance or support, he could have made different choices.

“Once you get into a section of work, that becomes part of your life. I think I got into it early and had some decent money as a young kid, and I stayed there. I think that impacted my life because then you’re staying in that job role for however many years. I could have done something else like a vocational course, non-curriculum-based. I decided to work. Had I made the decision to stay in college, or go to college, I think another career path could have happened. I could have been prime minister, by now.”

Despite the odds, some retained a strong sense of optimism and a positive attitude. Being in the UK was seen as an achievement. These men were able to find a new identity and pursue new opportunities. This gave them a strong sense of purpose and personal agency that enabled them to recalibrate their goals and make ends meet.

“After I had an interview, most of them, I was rejected. I don’t know why. I saw so many people, some jobs, I’m overqualified. It depends how hard I try. If my life is not getting favour on it, I can’t get it. My luck was here. Now, I have to build something. I have to build here, now.” Male, computer repair worker, parent was a civil engineer

Those who are excluded from the job market

Our research also showed that for some individuals, irrespective of their ethnicity, data was missing on their current occupation and therefore they could not be classified as upwardly or downwardly mobile. While they technically cannot be defined as experiencing downward mobility, there was no evidence explaining why their occupation was not recorded or why they might be unable to enter the job market. We decided to explore their experiences in order to better understand any limitations people in this group might face that are preventing them from entering the job market.

The quantitative analysis found that around 1 in 10 women (12%) and 6% of men,⁴⁰ there was no data about their occupation. The analysis showed there was a range of reasons why individuals' occupations were not specified, including seeking work, education, early retirement, poor health and disabilities, or caring responsibilities. The two main reasons for people's limited ability to work were either looking after family or the home (around 40% of women) or ill health and disability (about 50% of men). We selected some participants meeting this profile for qualitative research.

The men we spoke to faced serious or life-changing injuries and ill health. Some had the capacity and ability to re-enter the job market under favourable conditions but faced constraints restricting them from progressing further. Similarly, women had had to give up their careers to meet caring responsibilities.

Case study: Samuel Amaning, 40, South Croydon

Samuel Amaning grew up in Tooting, south London. Both his parents were immigrants from Ghana, West Africa, and had professional jobs. His father was a lawyer and his mother a teacher.

Samuel knew early on that he didn't want to follow his father down the professional route. He started an A level in law but dropped out. "I wasn't as academic as he was. I didn't really have the desire and love for it that he did", he recalls.

After taking A levels in English literature, English language, government, politics and IT, Samuel went to university to study business information systems and management. He found a job for an IT training company soon after graduating, and then moved to the NHS.

Now he lives in south Croydon, with a wife and two children, and works for the NHS as a project manager on £45,000 a year.

"For us, success is about being comfortable, being able to enjoy life and being able to spend time with family. That's much more important to us than career progression", he says.

Although Samuel earns comfortably, the increased cost of living, and housing in particular, means that money feels tighter than it did growing up.

"[My parents] were earning decent money but it was a lot cheaper to live", he says. "We're earning good enough money but we're not well off."

He believes taking a non-professional career route has allowed him more flexibility and a better quality of life for his family.

"I saw how much my parents suffered in terms of my childhood – always doing the late hours – and that definitely put me off of going down that route", he says.

"Having a lot of family time is important. You don't really get that when you're in a highly pressured, busy job, bringing work home and working long hours."

PHOTO REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR ON

⁴⁰ Authors' calculations using the LFS, July to September 2014–2018.

Although his parents initially wanted Samuel to follow his father into law, as time has gone on their perspective has changed. “As I’ve grown, they’ve become less worried about it and more concerned with us being happy”, he adds.

Conclusion: Level paths

Narratives surrounding social mobility tend to link mobility with an upward trajectory, focusing on individuals' capacity to rise through society's occupational ranks. However, social mobility is a 'zero-sum game', and where there is upward social mobility, there must equally be those who move down. The current research has explored the prevalence, nature and consequences of downward mobility, examining the lived experience of those who are downwardly mobile.

In exploring downward mobility, this research challenges a notion of success defined only in the relatively narrow, linear terms of gaining material wealth and ascending the career ladder. Many of those defined as downwardly mobile had re-evaluated success over the course of their lives, pointing to their contribution to the community, the essential nature of their low-status work, and their efforts in caring for children and others, as markers of a successful life. However, the research also highlights the way in which the zero-sum game does not always provide a comfortable outcome for those who move downward. For some, involuntary downward mobility leads to a vicious cycle of low wages, long hours, caring for children and low prospects for career advancement, making life difficult and draining. In addition, the effects of lowered status in the eyes of society can cause emotional distress, affecting people's mental health and wellbeing.

This work highlights a lack of fairness in the way that downward mobility occurs. There are many for whom downward mobility is the direct and damaging consequence of a range of disadvantages and limitations experienced throughout the course of their lives. Experiences at school and in adolescence were particularly important, given the crucially important role of education in downward mobility. Some had suffered the effects of abuse, neglect, bereavement or divorce during their childhoods. For many, the lack of the right support and intervention at the right moment meant that they had missed opportunities to fulfil their potential. Many lacked a sense of connection to school and academic attainment was not their focus. A lack of encouragement, combined with lack of opportunity, meant they hadn't identified a career that might have fulfilled them. Upon leaving school, many felt a pressure to earn, or didn't feel that opportunities extended beyond a narrow set of options.

It is in the world of work where the disadvantages faced by those who are downwardly mobile are thrown into sharp relief. Certain groups were far more likely to face disadvantages at work than others. BAME migrants found themselves at a distinct disadvantage in the job market. With a far higher likelihood of experiencing downward mobility than their white and UK-born counterparts, Black and Bangladeshi migrants described their difficulties in finding a job commensurate with their level of qualification, and in progressing in workplaces with opaque

hiring and progression practices that seem to isolate and exclude them at every turn. For some with a disability or health condition, negative attitudes and inflexibility in the workplace had limited their ability to work or forced them out of employment completely. For women with caring responsibilities, the workplace could be a distinctly unwelcoming environment, with a lack of flexibility and highly competitive work cultures combining to prevent women from developing their careers.

These research findings arise at a time of impending and potentially multiple economic crises in the UK, as the far-reaching impacts of the coronavirus begin to be considered and the economic and labour market impacts of the UK's departure from the EU become clear. Together, these existing and impending economic shocks are likely to involve further job losses and more limited opportunities. We already know that many individuals from BAME backgrounds are more at risk from the health impacts of the coronavirus. Many individuals in the retail, hospitality and service industries are likely to be at further risk of losing their job or reduced employment prospects as a result of the current restrictions. Apprenticeship and training opportunities also seem likely to dry up as firms cut back on costs. Society and policy-makers will need to consider carefully how to protect those in lower-status jobs in these industries who are likely to feel this loss most keenly.

These findings suggest that efforts should be focused on reducing structural inequalities, not only by improving access to higher and further education for those from a range of socio-economic background, but in policies that will enable young people to look beyond their next pay packet to consider their future career. Employers have a key role in creating workplaces in which parents and carers feel that they can belong, and in driving out practices that discriminate against people based on race and ethnicity. At a time of considerable pressure on families and those with caring responsibilities, society and policy-makers must redouble their efforts to support those who can 'fall through the cracks'. This includes those caught in a vicious cycle of working, caring and low wages who may lack the resources to help themselves.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the findings for society and policy-makers lies in the painful testimonies of those who feel themselves judged and demeaned by the negative stereotypes linked to jobs categorised as nearer the bottom of the career ladder. Since the fieldwork took place, the global pandemic has cast a new light on the essential role played by supermarket workers, cleaners, carers, school and nursery staff, and other essential workers. The fundamental value of these roles is not doubted by those who do them, but their sense of society's collective judgement makes them feel less valued in this important work. It may have taken a global pandemic to correct this misperception.

The need to ensure fairness and equality across society is urgent now more than ever, as an underpinning principle in the efforts to deal with the aftermath of the crisis. Work needs to be undertaken in tandem with the leadership within key sectors of the economy to see how the remuneration and recognition of these occupations can be recalibrated in line with the level of their contribution.

Glossary

Background and introduction

Occupational mobility	Can either mean the class destinations of people in comparison with their origins (absolute occupational mobility) or the relative chances of individuals of different occupational origins arriving at different occupational destinations net of all change in the occupational structure (relative occupational mobility).
Occupational status	Occupational level according to the National Statistic Socio-Economic Classification. This is the best national measure that allows us to monitor occupational social mobility. We define an individual's social background by understanding the occupation to which their highest-earning parent belongs.
Upward social mobility	Shift in an individual's status from a lower to a higher status, often measured by what percentage of people occupy a higher status in the social hierarchy than their parents.
Downward social mobility	Shift in an individual's social status from a higher to a lower status, often measured by what percentage of people occupy a lower status in the social hierarchy than their parents.
Glass floor/opportunity hoarding	Where people's parents occupy a higher status in the social hierarchy, they are much more likely to have a similar high status, thus excluding those with less privileged backgrounds from accessing similar opportunities.
Glass ceiling	Where those less privileged in society face structural barriers in accessing higher-status occupations.
Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)	Those belonging to all ethnic groups other than the White British ethnic group.
Caring responsibilities	All of those who are involved with caring for a vulnerable family member. This can include those caring for their children, elderly relatives or a disabled person.
Qualitative analysis	Synthesis of data from focus groups among the general public and in-depth interviews among people who are downwardly mobile. See technical report for full details.

Quantitative analysis	Synthesis of data from several large datasets, including the National Child Development Survey, British Cohort Study and Understanding Society (see glossary for Chapter 1). See technical report for full details.
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Chapter 1: Understanding downward mobility

Meritocracy	This is a type of political system, or a way to organise/view society. Meritocracy is the idea that people's progress in society is based on ability and talent rather than other privileges (which might be inherited) such as occupational grouping or wealth. In meritocracies, individuals should be rewarded and should advance based on merit, rather than these privileges.
Occupational group	Level of occupation in the seven-class hierarchy described in the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC).
Professional occupation	These are defined as NS-SEC 1 and 2 occupations – managerial and professional (as per standard reporting). Examples include CEOs, senior police officers, doctors, journalists, barristers, solicitors, teachers and nurses.
Intermediate occupation	These are defined as NS-SEC 3 and 4 occupations. Examples include shopkeepers, paramedics and police officers.
Working/lower occupation	These occupations are defined as NS-SEC 5, 6, 7 occupations – routine and manual. Examples include receptionists, electricians, plumbers, butchers and van drivers.
Socio-economic grade	Demographic classification according to a set of occupation gradings.
Socio-economic background	Socio-economic grade of an individuals' parents.
Labour Force Survey	Representative survey of the UK population, with detailed data on individual occupations, earnings, education qualifications and subject of study at higher education (if attended).
National Child Development Survey	Longitudinal study of 17,000 people born in one week in March 1958.
British Cohort Study	Longitudinal study of 17,000 people born in one week in April 1970.
Understanding Society	Longitudinal study of 40,000 households from 2010 onwards.
World Economic Forum	A membership-based non-governmental organisation, with membership made up of the world's largest corporations. WEF hosts an annual meeting in Davos.
Early ability/early skills	Measure of academic ability in children based on tests of cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

Chapter 2: Changing gears

Scope	The breadth of attractive opportunities that an individual perceives to be within their reach. This includes job opportunities or opportunities to further a career through study or other means, but also opportunities to make changes in other domains of life – for example, the places they might live or the experiences they might have in the future. A broad scope of opportunities brings a more positive and optimistic quality to someone's life, whereas a narrow scope of opportunities contributes to a more pessimistic and negative outlook, especially when someone is less satisfied with their current life situation.
Agency	The extent to which an individual perceives that they have the capacity to effectively pursue opportunities open to them. This is influenced by psychological factors such as confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy, and also by the extent to which someone is appropriately skilled or qualified to navigate the available opportunities.
Satisfaction	The extent to which an individual feels content with their life. Several factors could contribute to this sense of contentment, including internal factors such as the extent to which a person perceives a scope of opportunities and their sense of personal agency, and external factors such as work–life balance, income and health.
External factors	Life circumstances that are outside an individual's control or can only partially be controlled. These include, for example, an individual's state of health, income level, family structure or the type of job they have.
Enabling/constraining factors	Circumstances and mindsets that support/restrict an individual in achieving their personal goals. These goals are subjective and not necessarily linked to social mobility.

Chapter 3: A slippery slope? Involuntary downward mobility

Structural inequalities	An unequal distribution of opportunities across society as a result of structural barriers.
Structural barriers	Factors outside an individual's control that are linked to someone's background, identity, ability or status and restrict access to services and opportunities, such as access to healthcare, housing, income, or educational or job opportunities. Structural barriers can be shaped and reinforced by institutions and government policy.
Higher education	Higher education is education that takes place after an individual leaves school, in an academic institution such as a university, resulting in an academic qualification such as a university degree.

Further education	Further education takes place after an individual leaves school, in an institution other than a university, resulting in a vocational qualification such as a Higher National Diploma or a Higher National Certificate.
Adverse childhood experiences	Stressful or traumatic experiences taking place in childhood, such as abuse, neglect, parents' divorce or the death of a parent or carer.

Appendix

Qualitative analysis in detail

The main stage of research involved a three-stage interview approach during which researchers interacted with downwardly mobile individuals over a period of time to build trust and carry out more nuanced exploration of their experiences, expectations, events, influences and decision-making.

In total, 42 three-stage interviews were completed between October 2019 and January 2020. All participants were aged 30–50 and had experienced downward mobility. Interviews took place face to face where possible and were divided into three phases:

1. introductory interview – lasting one and half hours, to establish participants' details and build rapport
2. artefact collection – where each participant was asked to reflect on the key turning points in their life and upload an artefact reminding them of that moment through an online app
3. in-depth discussion – lasting two to three hours, aiming to understand the drivers behind decision-making and the nature and consequences of participants' downward mobility

Semi-structured discussion guides were used to ensure all relevant topics and key issues were explored consistently, while also enabling the interviewer to delve deeper into any issues of particular importance for participants.

As is common practice in qualitative research, a cash incentive was offered to encourage participation and as a gesture of appreciation for participants' time and contribution to the research. An incentive of £100 was given to participants who completed all three stages.

Each verbatim comment sets out the individual view of the participant who made it. Comments do not reflect the views of Ipsos MORI or SMC.

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